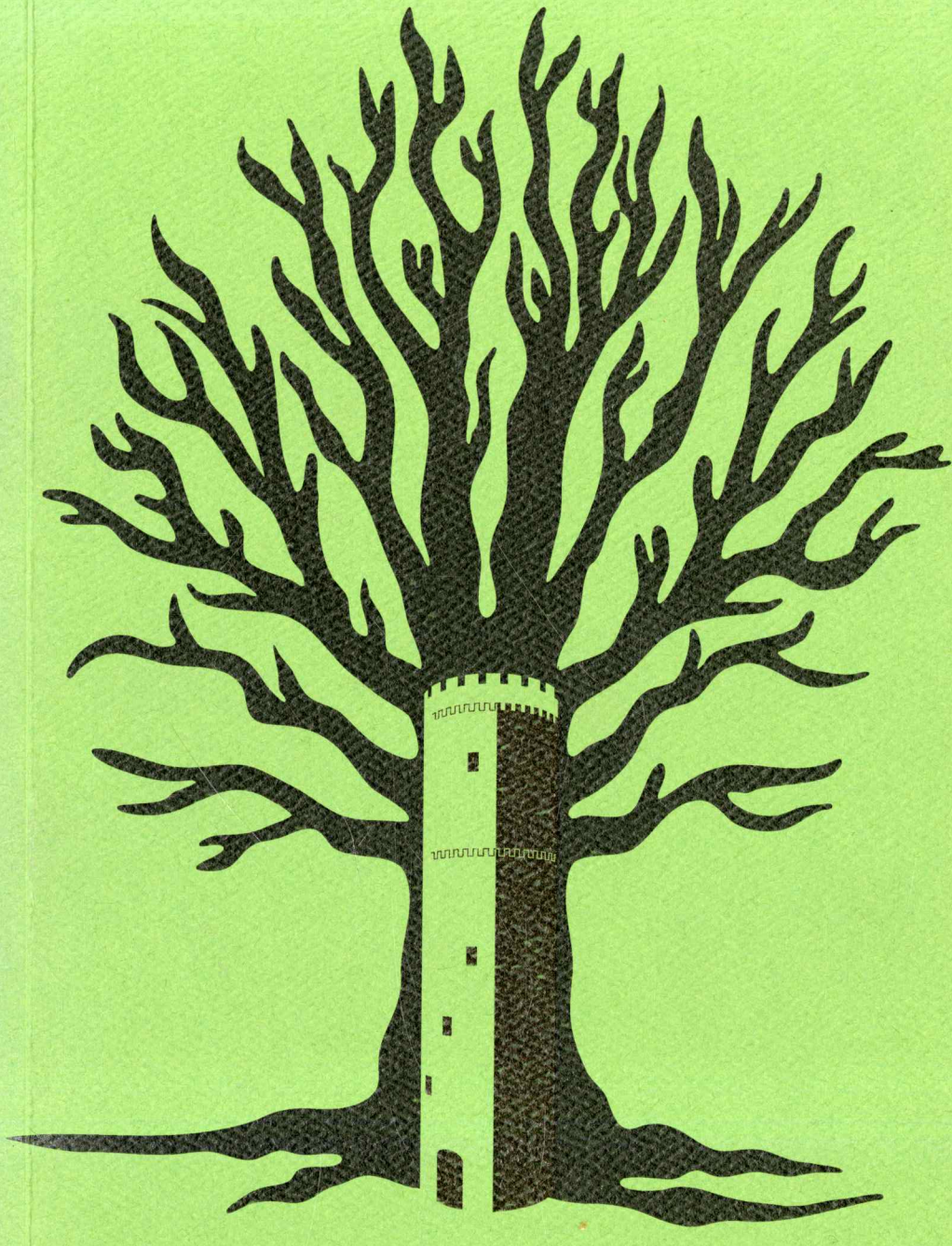

The Tower

2011 | University of Montevallo

The Tower 2011

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Poetry

West Finlayson

I Ate Everything

When I was a kid, I ate everything.
Marbles, little green army men,
the head of spider-man, I broke
a lava lamp, ate the wax,
and I probably ate you too.

What do you think could have happened?
Where would you be if I hadn't
eaten you?

What does the outside world look
like, do you wonder? It must be where
everything exists and is tolerable.
Where we swim up waterfalls and
shoot arrows into the prismatic
foamy spellstreams of creation.
Where we are all knighted
for our innocence.

Cold white stones would fall sweetly
from our eyes and onto each other
as we exchanged our sacred moistures.
We would be the first to defile that place.

It's true though, what you were saying about me,
that I'm terrified of my own body,
what goes in it.
What could come out?

Beaux Buchanan

Coming of Age at McDonalds

I sat looking at my burger and fries,
My three brothers and little sister were losing their minds in the ball pit.
I felt a great change coming.

Who would still want to be a child at the age of twelve?
The thought of being a little kid was getting to be too much for me.
It had to stop at eleven!

"Don't you want to play with your brothers and sister, Beau?" Mom asked.
"No Mom, I'm a grown up now.
I'm too old to play in the playplace." I informed her.

My fries were soggy and extra salty from my tears of responsibility,
My burger tasted like unpaid bills,
And my shoes felt tight.

Mom smiled, and put her arm around me
Thank God for moms.
I felt better.

Karson Goodman

thegodandmaryvideo

There is no doubt: I will return to my old ways.
I will not love in spring. November turns and turns, but won't wake to regain balance.
Zion, sewn with salt, lays alms for displaced Palestinian olive farmers.
These are my ironic hands, unfolding the dog-ears in your textbook.
Today's nuisance.
Tomorrow's
neck-in-a-noose.
Words aren't as captivating. The bottle, not nearly as charming, holds us to a weekend ritual of self-defamation—expressive and yearning for a new blue throne to soil.
Twin suns settle
in Siberia. For you and I. For Mother and the dog.
Laying down our crowns in excrement. Reckless debauchery.
De Sade put to shame. But it's cold there!
Fresh from the womb,
They knew I'd return, the prodigal son.
To lampshade-warm arms.
To a stalemate, suave and silent.

Travis Swinford

Eager Position

The dogs will cross the water/dividing the black and the white/I can't be one without the other/I can't help be on both sides

Jumping the door when it knocks/sinks its teeth into all and smells/ chasing a notion of nothing/found, pointed forward–emerging

Hannah Conner

Babe's Lounge

The curbed plaid couch on South Sixth Street caught your eye
sometime after 2 a.m.
as you drove aimless through your carved-out week—
an hourglass whittled from wood.
You pulled over in your car to sit on that couch—
to smell the body-salty scent of it, and to feel the cushions,
still family-warm, compress as they would beneath you.
It was there that you had a thought, conjured up by that dank ugly sofa—
a combination of first-dog-fever-dream-food-coma-football-game-and-the-soft-things,
all of the soft things, you had ever touched.
They all became an image of your mother
peering through the window as you played outside.
Then you thought of the wooden barstool you had just left,
recognizing that each memory took on that strange pattern,
and that every new thought was coming to resemble more and more
the dancer as you'd seen her:
bent before you, her ass which, for some reason
reminded you of a clenched fist waving at the sky.
No one loves a dancer like a dancless man does.

Megan Hallmark

A Bare Bodied Sin

Custard walls whisper
sweet nothings to the floor
        Tiles cool
and there's a lock on the door

A linen basket lends refuge
to goosebumped skin
        Droplets caress
a bare bodied sin

Plaid covers lace
lazily and strewn
        Pleasure smiles
at tender flushed flesh not alone

Soap lays lazily
around the drain
        Steam drips
and drifts down the mirror pane

Josh Womack

Carapassion

A well-kept house is a sign of control;
The firmest on rock.

But in the sand, a little exemplar is reluctant to move.
The sessile snail leaves trails of command—
Revealing to housewives everywhere the heavy secrets
Of how homes thrive on Atlas' brawn.
The rippling mussels support that claim,
Though the waves dust and maim them.

But the wife isn't adrift in that sea of temptation.
She is well-bricked with control of the high seas:
Levying and maintaining baseboards—
Not to mention how seriously she takes the crown molding.
Every day reigns over what comes naturally . . .
Dust, rust, and any random instant of idleness.

The hermit knows his dome is a breeding ground
For generations who live up to expectations.
Success, success, successful are the walls
Which plan and guide tenants toward a well-kept home—
A great thing for a great-great generation to have built.
The founders wished the home would move the kids,
Whose dreams, unfortunately, were the stuff of a carapace.
    Those who have lived there tell their absent guests
    That the floors are a rich-mahogany catafalque at best,
    And the doors are the only host of signposts.
They say in a soft tone, of domestic gloom,
"There's not much room for hope in this home."

Karson Goodman

Maybe It Should Just be a .

Can an art be crafted, one which surpasses the bit of life it reflects? What skill! What pair of hands, fingers precise and flowing, but nimble and delicate! Flowing in and out of space. Of blue wind. Of love, for themselves and for creation. Cyclical nurture of the child—closing the gap between genesis and the all-encompassing stroke. No. Existence is greater. A truth that comes this easily cannot fail, or else, creates a rut of skepticism and loathing. Genius lies behind the sieve.
And nature in front.

Alexandra Reagin

Music

Haunting strands of things unspoken
A lyrical blend for messages broken
Soothing what's caged, melancholy filled
Instruments lifting, hearts to be stilled

Evan Patton

Carmeuse Lime

Static descends into Carmeuse Mind tonight,
Upstanding signs strike the grey soil,
in front of Carmeuse Lime.
A swan sits poised with careless rear feathers,
on the sign in front of Carmeuse Lime tonight.
Dogwood grips dirt sinking
honeycombed web into the static sea.
Roots have discovered shells tonight
eviscerating in cobalt beams,
in front of Carmeuse Lime tonight.
Clouds settle upon indolent roots,
turning meshed eyes to white.
Trunk trembles with creaking
ash pushed through sap-veins.
And the moon is cascading heat
searing signs tonight,
in front of Carmeuse Lime.
Buds shiver in hot shells of grey bark,
as four petals lacerate waiting air-
evaporate into white posterity where
a swan is poised with careless rear feathers,
in front of Carmeuse Lime tonight.
And as the cloud morphs into
ground-bracing heaven,
blossomed spores spray the wind.
At the moment of conception,
static winds smoke screen the signs
of Carmeuse Lime tonight.
A showered swan lifts into bracing mist,
a static blood is born into the crest of a wave.
White eyes drown as in fire or lime, [1]
in front of Carmeuse Lime tonight.
The moon pulls the air
away from white signs
of Carmeuse Lime tonight.

1 Allusion to Wilfred Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est".

Morgan Brooks

Our Bodies

Our bodies,
Tangled together like saplings after a storm...
Give me the chance to learn these new limbs
And climb them til their skinny, knotted fingers merge with the sky above our heads.
Forced to throw my head backwards to view the union, they are
Naturally disorienting in their magnificence.

The lines of your face slack and soften into slender curves
As you're sleeping.
And I slip and drip and drain slowly into
Your heavy-lidded and -lashed dreamer eyes.
(I'll stay in them til the morning
When you wake and shy them away --
Open, and so unshielded in your vulnerability.)

Ahmad Jackson

Lemme Count The Ways I Love You

2000	I love yous
1000	Sext messages
500	hours of FB chatting
200	hours of FB stalking
100	Missed calls
50	Fuck yous
40	Break up & make ups
20	Flings & one night stands
10	Awkward meetings
5	What ifs
1	

J. Hamlin

What's a Poet Like? Well...He's Like a Sandpiper:

The sandpiper runs along the shoreline
Pecking at whatever the ocean will give him to survive.
Back and forth he goes
finding new things in already searched places.
Sometimes, he will follow the ebb out into the ocean,
Knowing that's where it's food is;
but when the ebb runs to meet the sandpiper,
the sandpiper runs away
knowing he will drown if he gets caught up.
They then constantly
fight this fight,
dance this dance;
until the sandpiper gives up
and accepts he only can get
what the ocean will give him,
for today.
What he does not know,
is that he is walking the line where oblivion meets earth.
Dodging,
Surviving,
And dwelling between both.
Understanding the relationship between the two
better than most.

Danielle Robinson

Alone With the Lily-Pad Sofa

I've been arrested
More times than any
Of my roommates!
His voice booms and bounces
Down the finger printed hall.

Breaks the barrier
Made by the closed
Bedroom door I lay behind,
Cloaked in his black comforter.
The reverse side, crimson,

Meets my still sleeping eyes.
The black veil envelops the
Pulsation of a stone-shaped organ
As the sound pounds through vents and
Intertwines with guys' boisterous laughter.

3 A.M. yelling from the living room:
Damn cops!
Fuck them!
Dude, what a record!
That's all I hear from them

About the escapade
Of juvenile delinquency
He and his buddies
Shared while I slept.
Awake, my spine twitches and crumbles

While my boyfriend and
His friends
Express climactic engagement,
Like carnivores over dead prey,
About the story

Of which I'm presently unaware.
I wait for doors to slam and
Silence to ensue the apartment
Before I emerge from the darkness
Behind the bedroom door

My timid question to the sofa, Where is he?

Gone for beer is the reply.
He left me with a stranger
Sitting on the lily-pad sofa.
White-hot panic flecks my eyes
While red sun scalds each cheek.

Eyes of a frog focus on me,
Bulbous, watching me squirm
Like a fly crushed between a wall and
My grandmother's pastel pink fly swat.
Frog legs tense, squat to on the green leaf.

Its momentary linger
Stills my breath against my own tongue.
I must leave through the same door
My boyfriend slammed his fist against.
The lily-pad sofa rocks on waves like tears.

As the monster's cushioned smile widens,
Its rubbery tongue stretches to meet me.
Let him know I won't be back.

Where I slept, unaware.
One friend remains—not mine
As I find upon surfacing from the room.
He was lost the moment the cuffs were removed.

Eric Patton

Sedentary Under My Skin

Watching the grin on that face
shrink till expire
It is my fire
Burning reminiscent
of a love I don't believe in anymore
Yet I play with hot coals
Juggle all the day and night
charring my my hands to satisfaction

Your amorous ideals are, to me,
nothing more than chemical appeals
But at least it's not love
fed through needle or pill

Josh Womack

Tar Baby Poetry: An Afterthought from the Author Himself

Channel your madness, thoughtful one,
Or you shall find a desperate end:
Your ideas are the trumpets of angels—So imaginative and high-up
where the sound is an unutterable hum.

Hear my words, nostalgic mind,
Or you shall live ever long ago:
Your anger is ripe for the picking, not the archives—

It's no good excavating that fertilizer, son.

For now,
I permit you to write for the faint-hearted from time to time,
But know that
They
Want

That
Raw emotion.
That cardiac compassion—
The smells, the feelings, the chunky, sodden, parasitic taste of sand
As it sifts through whitened teeth;
You know,
The salty substance everyone is willing to taste,

But never swallow.

The only good stuff can be pinched, or
Known by olfactory sense.
Yeah, they want what they already know.

So tell your intellectual endeavors to fuck off—
Along with their inconsistencies, vague leads, and pretentious,
closed-off epiphanies,
Because they aren't surface level.
Morph your thoughts into a relatable sound,
So that people can understand
The aggressive thud of surrogate hearts as you lay them upon
universal shards.
They'll all appreciate the clarity.

Know, it is not your choice to mind the muck.

Jeremy Dunn

the low hum

below, tumbling, the quiet hum—
a stream bears the splintered reflection
of the zenith star
a momentary supernova flash
across the fluid black
the small stream not arguing
just gurgling, flowing back
to the center of some unnamed something

Josh Womack

This Tapestry Does the Gods Defile

We sundered stride, among Chaos,
Emptiness, lacking confidence,
Toddling on swollen feet,
As some disconnected infants.

As for Plato, neither a complete man,
He, too, was given Zeus' word: to sever
Four arms, four legs, two lips, two heads;
To dam our rolling wave forever.

The god has punished a trespass,
Clove valleys in our property
And distilled our body of affection—
A lake drug 'round until futility
Overcame the straight connection.
Today, our Ark lies far from here,
A separated circlet, unwed,
In a newly-gendered biosphere.

Now the canals of our fingertips touch
The distress of our remote song:
"For a last duet, dear, my soul does long.
Where are you and your silky cocoon?
You muse who spun all my gifts into a ball;
What rut causes your threaded womb to clog,
And who forbids our tumble?
Oh, my lovely freedom fighter:
We revolt only to lose our revolution,
But are we less fortuned than the spider?"

Oh world! Oh fair Gaia! Turn, turn
Over as endlessly as we:
Turn and mark how we roll still; turn
And watch us—bloom another cheek.

Aida Dabit

Pull

My lips on your paper
Then your lips on mine
We'll smoke each other out in this bleary sunrise
Watch the night turn day
Watch your clothes fall away
With the windows letting in enough light
That we can lock up and lock eyes
Choke on each other's carbon dioxide
Revel in the smooth and sex
Against a wall or in a corner
Knuckles in my back
Mouth to ear
Face to neck
Breasts to chest
And I'll fall asleep
With my legs lost under yours
And our friends slip messages
Wrapped in foil under our door
To let us know we're known.

Kacee Ross

I Drink for Mother

Call for Mother
a lonesome bosom,
a careful eye
of diamond prism

Wait for Her
She'll wait for me,
She'll find me in
the pecan tree

Wrapping wildly
a branch with feather,
My cotton shirt
with holes of weather

Wait for Her
She'll wait for me,
She'll find me in
the pecan tree

Drink a drink
sing a song,
Oh, Mother knows
we get along

Wait for Her
She'll wait for me,
She'll find me in her
when I flee

Ahmad Jackson

Acid Refluxx

Arise, ye child of night
Sweating, piss-spouting
And clawing at the sun with
Devil eyes squinting at her dreary and hazy glory.
You hang your well-fed head in awe,
And look around your leaf and gravel covered bed.
From fey to Frankenstein, you wonder what
Possessed you for this creation. Why
Make this structure your vine-tangled haven? Who
Was that creature puttering about in your skin and where
Had he taken you in the night's impulse?

But this doesn't matter. Why should the Clock care
How you came by this fantastical lair?
Fix your collar, button those slacks,
And comb the moonlight out of your hair.*
Run back to your street,
Back to your corner,
Back to the back of the bus

* "Another Day" - Rent

Alexandra Reagan

Lilith's Prayer

My Lord, why dost Thou favor yon Man
When here Thy fair servant dost stand?
Am I not worthy as mine obdurate brother,
Nay, to suffer the indignities of another
So that pride of Male be satisfied,
And mine own will not be gratified?
To thus be unfairly vilified
In choosing not to stay his bride?
Equal thou hast made, for us to Thine obey,
Why then my Father must I parlay
For refusing submission to like companion
So that I may also claim to champion.
Bestowed upon him the title Alpha to Your Omega,
And I in his opinion merely granted the Beta?
This truly won't do, pray perish the thought,
To secure a witless partner, it must now be bought.
Of dust we were fashioned in Thine Holy image,
Now of Adam's rib will his mate permit marriage.
Thus securing a future of weak-bound mortals,
Unseeing the hellish fate, beheld by weeping angels.
This pair now cursed for a maiden's indiscretion,
How can she be blamed for unknown Evil's session?
When her purpose was only Man's pleasure
And Eve's own happiness not even measured.

Each sharing of body now also of blame,
Punish the one of which all trouble is claimed!
For Adam is arrogant, vainly boasting domination,
So here must he also pay reparation,
Else Human race hence be doomed for ignorance
When in truth is but guilty of naive innocence.
Mine refusal of Man is not disobedience,
Lord, I love Thee and only offer deference.
Heaven's host merits more than compliance;
Instead now a servant striving towards greatness,
For Thine own glorious praise I willingly harness
All mine talents Thou hast so graciously gifted
That I may one day join those joyously uplifted.
So Father I now ask Thee, please spare pitiful Eve,
And grant ME her guardianship by Your merciful leave.
She will better serve Thy will and great faith
With I as her mentor, her friend, her Lilith.
Our union may in time be tempted to Man's sins
And demons may beckon with salacious grins,
Yet with her love, I envision Humanity wins
... And so it begins.

Danielle Robinson

Dear Dad

Each phrase said of a different guy—
from the same mouth under a red mustache,
He's a good guy, just not quite there yet:
Caleb
Your mom and I think your boy-crazy:
Phil

Dad, I want him to be like you—
the guy that will try to hold a position
equal to you with Mom

I pull, scrape, to give you enough of me to be proud of,
but it will never be as much now as it was then—
the days you let me sit in the passenger seat
of the dump truck.
We'd leave sometimes at 5 a.m.
Head to a quarry for my summer vacation.
It's where I wanted to be—
with the dirt—with my Dad.
Early—and all of a work day

A few years ago you sold the dump truck.
I was afraid I'd lose the dusty seconds I had with you—
forget the moments like when you spoke
clearly over the CB radio
Let's watch the language today;
Got my daughter riding with me.

I'm almost 22—not the tomboy who raced
through the mud in a go-kart after a melted snow day,
just to show you how dirty I could get.
My legs have stretched—hair has been brushed—
traded the smell of grass and grease for perfume.

But before you hung up the phone with me tonight
you said I love you.
And it became another dusty second in the dump truck
full of perfect imperfection where the passenger seat
could bounce with the tumble of the load
pouring into the bed as I watched

—You will always be right, Dad
whatever you says I trust,
because I will never find a man like you.
Mom will just have to share a while longer—
until I find my own Ronald Robinson—

Megan Hallmark

A Sense of Summer

Freckled legs and painted toes
Sunscreen on a child's nose
Won't ignore the sights of summer

Fresh cut grass and bug spray mist
The skin that sweat-drenched shirts have kissed
Won't ignore the smells of summer

Midnight sobs and angry voices
Narrowed defensive word choices
Can't ignore the sounds of summer

Alone, hurry and wait all the time
Stilted conversations as they dine
Can't ignore the sense of summer

Hannah Allen

Obituary

I think decency died...
Don't know who struck the first blow.
Maybe it was the godless
Who demanded crosses
On graves be torn down.
Or the church that
Locked its doors
To keep that woman out
Who came in, Sat in the back,
Drank her coffee, Listened,
Left - Every Sunday.
She was probably black-skinned
Wore poor clothes.
Or maybe just some unaffiliated
Jerk who took the change
From the "honors" box.

Now we hear -
"Christians" saying faggot.
God loves everyone
But not really
Only if you believe.
You hear more hate than love
From them these days.

Now you see -
People burning flags
An honored symbol for many.
But don't dare you
Protest their protestations
Because you're the only bigot here.
Guess political correctness is a one-way street.

What happened
To kindness for
Kindness' sake,

To helping people
For peoples' sake?

Now there's just politics
And intellectual ideals.
If your side wins
And the whole world loses
That's ok.
Because decency died yesterday.

James A. Buchanan

The Final Duel

Across from me my opponent stands ready.
Our eyes burn through one another.
The world around us melted away ages ago, seconds ago.

He means to end my life, and I his.
Thinking leaves my mind as I try to read his.
My body becomes unified in my intent.

Our paths have met.
Our paths will cross.
One could leave.
Or both be lost.

My weapon ready.
Intentions move.
Synapsis fire.
Blood flows.
Muscles flex.

We both succeed in our goals.
I drop my weapon.
He fell first at least.
.....

Maranda Jennings, Ethan Taylor, and Megan Hallmark

Winnie-the-Poet

'Are you healthy?'

Yes, if by 'healthy,' you mean
pizza for breakfast,
doughnuts for lunch,
and a taco salad for dinner.

'Is that healthy?'
Of course it is!
Taco salad is still salad!

Dionysus would envy me.

Arteries squealing with glee,
I follow the last bite with a great,
rumbling oral flatulence.

You know,
people don't appreciate the
amount of soul
that goes into a good belch—

They're emissions of gas
In a higher class
of society.

With chomping jowls, I jam
spoonfuls of indigestion
Down a gaping gullet
Determinedly denying the
brownie's calories.

As the silver spoon passes
through my lips,
I swallow bolus after bolus of
ignorant bliss,
Gluttony is delicious.

I must obey the siren song,
As my baritone belly rumbles
along
Justifying my ingestion,
Eating aught without a question
By morning I will feel the ache
That my bulbous belly makes
But here again comes time for
lunch
Ad infinitum I will munch.

Jessica Hamlin

Parmenides Paradox

Constantly,
I am looking out of windows
Seeing the wind blow
The birds fly
And the squirrels gambol.
I reach out my hand,
Longing to feel the life I see
And am blocked
By a solid nothingness.
The trees call to me,
"Just come out!
Be with us!
Nothing is stopping you!"
"YES THERE IS!"
I scream back
But of course they can't hear me
The clear nothing swallows the sounds
That screech from me
Constantly.

Sometimes
The nothingness borrows my eyes
My hair
My nose
And my mouth
And this terrifies me
If I can see myself in the nothing
Am I now Nothing?
The ghost girl smiles back
"We'll have you all one day
All will see through you."
"NO YOU WON'T!"
I whisper and close my eyes.
Making her disappear.
But also
Making the life
Outside the window
Disappear
Sometimes.

Occasionally
The Sun shines through the nothing
It kisses my face
Embraces my shoulders
And blesses my mind.
It blinds me to the world outside
And makes the ghost girl disappear
Making me whole again.
"You are Mine child
Live always in Me."
"I will, forever and ever."
I proclaim, and I lift my arms
And close my eyes
So the gold beams though my lids
And I sing a song
I forgot how to sing
As the warmth radiates through me

Occasionally.

Travis Swinford

Buzzards, Lyrics

When your sleeping steps go to bed
and you can never leave the room
they will thoroughly, mockingly tear you down-
anything you could afford to lose:
Your garments have all become hide
and they would never drink a sip
of the water they have ruined
because you've never fixed the drip.
Yes they're glad you're always open
your job isn't to say well done
but they need appreciation
for how much further they have come.
The bottle's at your fingers
and the poison is coming from your teeth.
You've seen the way to say
but don't know how to teach,
All their dreams and aspirations
bled by holy kite rolls, Himself.
Yes the same one that you knew
helped them put trophies on their shelves.

I can't change your mind,
it's too far gone to wish.
I can keep my time,
it's just the buzzards I fly with

Danielle Robinson

When Pigs Play Chess
(After a print produced by West Fin)

Pigs have been genetically altered
Like the pages of a spiral notebook
Where the tip of a ballpoint pen drags
Ink that slashes through interwoven fibers
Of paper flattened under (2200 lbs per square in) of pressure

Expressive fingers lay claim to the twisted shapes
Of black and red as they tip and turn
Loop and burn into the paper
Ink seeps, soaks further the fibers of the damp material

Pigs have white meat
Like the ivory pieces left out of this game
Eight pawn advance from each side of the board
Each seeking power equal to the Queen
Who destroys, barring no obstruction

A black etched finger points to the sky
Signaling the game, asking the important question: Why?
Black knight, a stallion that can jump
Rushes against the diagonal ink lines of the bishop

Define the time sketched lines are rushed
As they spiral across the chess board to avoid a stalemate
Each piece searches to take the King
While those genetically altered pigs appear
As white meat and then turn back to red

Travis Swinford

A Dried Pen, Busting

"Now this terror and darkness of mind must surely be scattered,"
not by sun, not by arrows of light
but the outward unseen workings of Nature
For if not, we shall not call anything right,

A stone thrown from nothing, something says this: no beginning;
pulled by the absent gall apparent in our veins,
In the dirt and sky there are credits that seem lending
to divine, be the title to what we give our same names.

Crawl to the center of warnings left by Iffy and altars;
lucid there, buried by lucrative praise
poisoned what we once held as holy water,
wholly just, rather we just indicate our day

–to hold the world and feel ungrateful,
who doesn't need your mulct and oblige
breathed into defending our-kingdoms
if not fearfully loved, then no where to hide

Danielle Robinson

Dear Mom

Dear Mom,

Red felt bathrobe over Thanksgiving clothes—
you slice our Cajun turkey
with a barb-wired electric knife—
sounds like a tiny chop saw
echoing in the country blue cabinets.

My hands are thin, Drop
down in black and white.
Yours—delicate, sepia laced gloves of wisdom.
Nails long, clean.
Mine square—yours round at the tip.

At the kitchen's island I prop myself
On wooden elbows.
Peek through contacts of admiration
at your proper presentation for a gallery of family.
My painting in progress on the mahogany table—
under-painting shows work to be done.
You complete, through layers of Venetian glazes,
long due the final coat of varnish.

I stand, a reflection—
of you, of the Master Creator.
Have you seen our faces in my painting?
Two portraits—thought to be the same.
Will you let me sever the line a teacher tied?
A guide from hands imbued
to shape me.

Rachel Landers

Alzheimer's

Idly she sits
Contemplating wrinkled hands
Her wedding band still on,
He's been gone for fifteen years.

Her hair is coifed
Her dress is clean
Her lipstick slathered on.
She waits for him,
When he gets home,
He'll take her out
To dinner, the movies, or the fair.
He told her so.

Aimlessly her thoughts wander within her failing mind.
"He's coming now," she cries.
He's been gone for fifteen years.
Ever more her thoughts wander like butterflies.
Slipping ever deeper into the past.

Evan Patton

Spring Cleaning

The earth has souled out
as the big man says,
and this is where we learn to
spout
our names with pens,
poised to nail the ink,
to fuse the hand with links.

and I can only come out
with one life,
cause I'm different on paper.
and I never found much
reason to rhyme,
cause I'm different on paper.

So we go where the current
leads,
a tiny stream of clear blue
in a road packed with jellyfish,
with impulsive tentacles
built to protect posterity.
Whose family is it?

and I can only come out
with one life,
cause I'm different on paper.
and I never found much
reason to rhyme,
cause I'm different on paper.

Now we build a fence
round our quarter acre,
claiming ferrel heartbeats
with outstretched fists,
running water slipping
between our fingers.

Water blasts the pickets away
where we stand exposed
of skin and body,
and finally we know
our reason for defense.

and I can only come out with
one life,
cause I'm different on paper.
and I never found much reason
to the rhyme,
cause I'm different on paper.
understanding how to die,
cause I'm different on paper.

Ethan Taylor

These Things I Enjoy

Bridges,

trains,
balloons, ships,
sails, colored glass, snow on the beach,
frozen water, words, language, music, subways,
typewriters, books, photographs,
swing sets, ink,
dust motes,

sunshine,
rain, snowflakes,
tunnels, streetcars, imagination,
memories, silence, sound, shadow puppets, candles,
flames, wax, communities,
comfortable situations, spiral staircases,
camaraderie,

old phones,
wire connections, written letters,
traveling, discovery, robots,
plants, flowers, clouds, grass, breeze,
shadows, running water, warm blankets,
bicycles, seasons,
change,

sunsets,
sunrises, the horizon,
mirrors, time, living without time,
living within space, living, breathing, seeing, hearing,
touching, tasting, smelling,
being reminded of something vague by a scent, poetry,
Kerouacian conversations,

abstractness,
friendship, love,
thoughts, beliefs, emotion,
movement, ages,
beginnings,

endings.

Travis Swinford

Late Summer, Early Slam lyrics

Let the pilot be selfish
He's lost at his command

News he eats for breakfast
Just makes his mouth taste bland
The old mayor seemed so easy
Taking fair wit into account

He had parades the old way
There's a new one now

The eyes and lips are sealed
Getting ready for the rain
Their places are like other ones
Which call different names

The hiker who looks for gravel
In a field of dead trees

When he wanted to look for ashes
He could find no leaves
The silver statue is boring
It was traded for some wife

Only the way to be free
Is not clamored with dead eyes

Alexandra Reagin

Masquerade

The show must go on
Our costumes to don
This masked con
Forever till anon.
Life is merely a stage
With players all age
Each act scripted to page
Concealing the rage.

How bitter the role
The cosmos does dole
Compelling the soul
To fulfill an ordained goal.

But no pretty masquerade
Can disguise this charade
Of a caged mermaid
Marching to life's parade.

For when the curtain finally falls
And the stage no longer calls,
Where light darkens to empty halls
Signaling the end of masked balls,
Does truth and lies reveal
The inner self concealed.
All the better to heal
What in the heart is real.

So strip that which covers
What is faithfully smothered
Be it from father or mother
Or even the jealous lover.
That no matter what is reflected
You don't need to be perfected
Or forcefully injected
With thoughts of being protected
From what is truth and reality
Beneath the masks of social vanity.
Better to ensure your sanity
With simply defying gravity.

These costumes are nothing but insanity,
Just tear yours off and seek sweat levity
From this madness which plagues humanity.

Danielle Robinson

Eye of the Pond

Bold hands rip the journal from me,
like the stray wind whip of a hurricane—
pages twist, tear between his thunder clasp—
back muscles tighten beneath his black shirt
as he hurls the small leather book out into the yard.
Rain softens the beat of the blow against the wet earth.

A gust—the storm surge builds—I flounce from the porch, race across tall grass to the

pond—Tempest churning blood
in vessels.
Come back to the house with
the children! He calls. Sit in the
rocker.
I'm close to the edge already—
rocking chair legs clack across
boards
where it swayed with my weight
before my quake ensued—
a broken rhythm echoing under
the front porch.
No, John! Leave me with the
water!
I splatter my portrait arranged
with the fish.
I'm breaking slowly—he's been
saying—
because of my writing in the
Devil's Book.
He won't come all the way down
the hill—
won't meet me and the fish in
the ripples.
He retreats into the house with
the children
to escape the dark, the rain that
continues to fall—
permeates the thin fabric of my
dress.

I lay our love on the ground—
hide it
between the pebbles licked by
the pond.
I write Apathy in the mud with
a stick.
These fish here sense the
story—
know from my nightly visits with
them.
This is the first time my husband
has seen me come here,
but he would not leave me alone
tonight.

Inside, he watches the time—
waits for me—
the eye of the storm is around
us.
Fish and water swirl with the
wind—
wrap my ankles as I stand with
them,
barefoot in the edge of the
calm—
at the end of silence, the eye
passed,
my body slips beneath the
upsurge—
the fishpond will blanket me
tonight.

Ethan Taylor

The Joke

In our eighth year as friends, we reached
a little further
between sheets,
bleached white and starched, in
the contrived ambiance
of a hotel room.

More cautious than nervous, we peeled
to bare flesh
and proceeded
slowly, carefully, as though
we might break our
well-seasoned past with
our fresh exploration.

Both of us knew what
we each always wanted—
youthful tensions,
now matured into
full-scale desire—
and pursued it,
dismissing our prior reserve
as unfounded.

Our hands,
warm beneath
cotton and denim,
explored contours, sought
softness
with increasing confidence.

As trepidations diffused into
a scene of
two old friends, now
new young lovers,
she paused
at a joke made
in sharp contrast
to our actions.

We waited,
long enough to inhale and
share a glance before
we both collapsed
in laughter.

Hannah Allen

Sigh

I wish I were
That piece of song
Escaping down the hall.

I wish I were
A piece of home
Hanging from the wall.

I wish I were
Some breeze at night
Brushing through a tree.

I wish I were
One splash of moon
Lying on the sea.

I wish I were
My own small heart
Beating deep within.

I wish I were
Every flake of snow
Drifting in the wind.

I wish I were at home right now
With all my family.
I wish I were my own sweet place
Where I could dream in peace.

Aida Dabit

Turnabout

I want you to meet my tan lines
want you in places you haven't been kissing the spots where the white meets red or pink on your knees,
over me, beside me, under me
I want to fill your mouth until you've got no room for words
I want you grabbing my chest and gasping for breath
and so overwhelmed with craving that you're sick.
You say you've got no secrets,
I say that you lie;
But since you're a liar like me,
A liar who likes me,
I let it slide.
I want you to meet my medicine
want you in places you haven't been kissing the spots where the truth meets lies and lust on your knees, I'm over you, beside yourself, you're under me
I want to fill your head until you've got no room to think
I want you grabbing your chest and dying for breath
and so overwhelmed with crying that you're sick
Sick to your stomach, sick in the head, sick of the shaking, you crawl out of bed.

Megan Hallmark

Pyromania

My first real fire fed from Beech
Attracting attention with flame and heat
But he shot embers far and hot
He burned me up thorough and deep

My next attempt at fire was Poplar
A childish reaction to failure before
Easy to light snuff with no charcoal bed
No evidence left but my dirty nail bed

Another fire began with Spruce
Danger called, beckoned my name
Quick-burning sparks, a potential noose
I lost control, left to mercy and shame

Elder, another reckless flame
No inhibitions and no brain
Smoke in my eyes, rapid movement to end
Little comfort or heat, but I did pretend

Ordinary kindling blinded me
Elm wasn't a fire I could build
He sought attention for an intense burn
But I was left a charred dirt field

Apple stirred up embers, trying to glow
The smell sweet and the burn warm
But the flame steadily too slow
Burning in slumber, resolved to ash by morn'

The current fire being stoked burns Ashwood
Perfect heat to wrap around me tight and good
The flame only brightens my path, my face
He's burning a slow and steady pace

• • •

Danielle Robinson

Status Change

A whole body of work—you select the accident
to comment. Complain that the credit was lost,
as if it sank in a virtual lake while we peered
at muck-fish beneath the splintered dock—

stars turned to wordless rain.
Twins—customers at work called us.
Always together—sisters until Spring Break
changed us. I went with you once,

then not the next. For two weeks
mascara must have blocked your view—
two months, you scurried as a opossum stranger.
You hid from me behind a blue name tag—

under the black hat—blond bangs,
I cut for you once—and mud-hole eyes criticized.
There is a boy in your life,
Broke a chamber in your heart once,

when the colors of music and alcohol mixed
with the smells of her perfume—
his lips as they touched wet with hers.
That night, when he finally told you,

sour lemon drop tears hit low notes
like a piano that released knotted ropes inside me.
I was with you until the crickets stopped singing—
to blue and yellow sky.

Four a.m. I went back to my dorm
to tent my own sheets over my head
instead of comforting yours until the turquoise
threads beaded in my fists.

I used viper words to comfort—you rubbed them out
like a charcoal sketch with your finger.

Ethan Taylor

O My Delectable Magnificent!

O my delectable magnificent!
Thou art so subtle and, in truth, divine;
Thy taste doth merely whisper peppermint
As it consumes my body and my mind.
Thou dost imposeth here upon my core,
With such a minty thinness that doth quell,
The softness of a glutton and yet more,
Though rampant want within my gut still dwells.
But whilst, at first, thou hast great quantity
And flaunt thyself to me as decadent,
In but two bites, thou hast abandoned me
And left me naught such goods as Heaven sent.
Until bereft I find the box so nice,
Which cost my purse a total dollar thrice.

Jeremy Dunn

Niches

In the night
they creep to the roadsides,
splintered shards of light
arcing above them.

Mammalian quadrupeds
pick over the leavings of people:
food and wrappers, beer and
soda cans,
plastic bottles.

They mosey,
discovering
the wonderful remnants
of the creatures
who know God.

To all, this place means food.

The opossum and raccoon
come searching for scraps,
then the raptor
with a quiet rush of wings

and then the grumble
of encased explosions.

To all, this place means death.

Do they know?
Do they know the headlights
that cut through the darkness?

Pelvis in a bucket seat
and beams, feeling,
discover
some quiet creature.

A brief puzzlement,
the communion of steel and flesh
and a question of niches

as steel hurdles on
and a trace of soul
seeps into the roadside.

West Finlayson

One day, I promise,
the clouds will
part over you too,

but do you ever think of
the windchime tune
marching into the river

as you neared the
white plastic bucket,
the smell of freshwater
microorganisms
while the brim were
bedding in the night
beneath the pier?

the nose,
a prophetic organ,
so you knew already
about the panting
catfish in a single
gallon of water.

You knew that you
had stepped into a
dream as its lips moved
mutely like the slow
turning wheel of a
wrecked bicycle, unable
to warn you, unable
to beg of you.

Travis Swinford

You'll be fine, lyrics

The break that came and drove
your fathers away,
didn't need any help from you
To staple back to what has
happened,
to state your dues– could be just
like mine

But I don't care I don't care
as soon as you get scared
please remember I don't care

I'll come back just fine
You can too just take your time

Your time is new it always has
been,
to feel something you cannot
defend.
There's an answer you don't
know how to get,
there's an angel in this room you
can't forget

Kacee Ross

I Cried, I Cracked

I felt my moon blister burn
I felt something calling me to
bone, rock, and blood
Buried under fervent
fall flowers dying, lying in
bone, rock, and blood
It was the wild eyed moon
It was the blood of tree limbs
It crooned a windblown tune of
bone, rock, and blood
And I cried to know it true,
cracked all my bones in two
and there I died in
bone, rock, and blood

Jeremy Dunn

Winter Beeches

In the winter woods
the beeches stand like wraiths,
holding their gossamer leaves—
frail exoskeletons,
wisps of silver memory
amidst the gray.

Kacee Ross

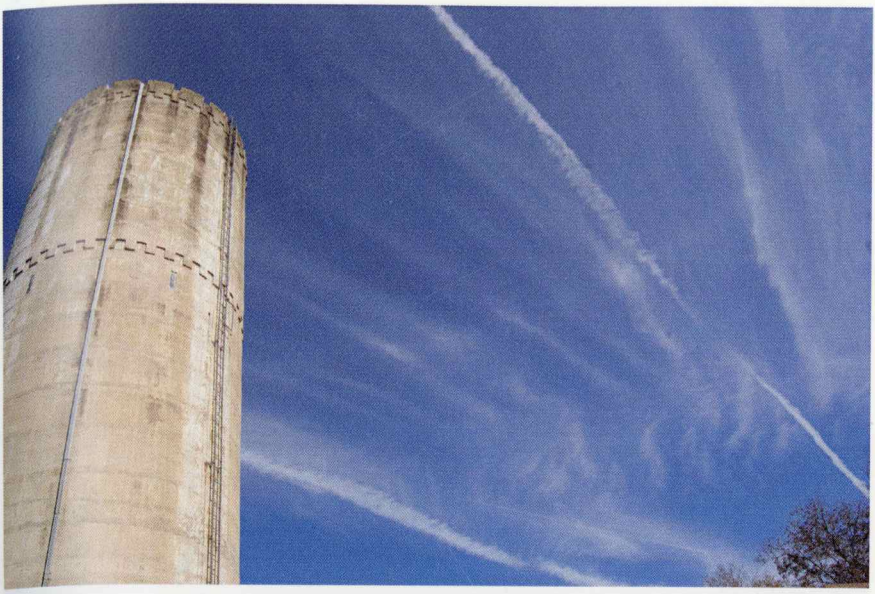
Your Body is Full of Symmetry

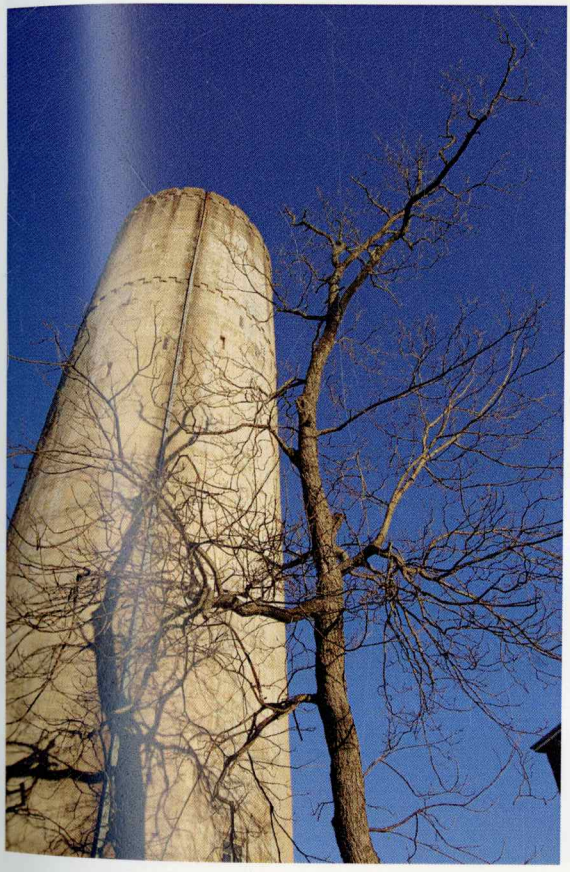
What will I do
I'll occupy assured hands,
gentle possibility,
become light
that breaks
your sphere
merge,
emerge
when breath
escapes us both
I'll recede into sheets,
watch this...

Vanish
poised between
two truths
I'm
vanishing,
no wishing,
no perfection,
a first and final thought
that endures
flushed expression

I climb back through,
be in your warm bath
radiating
to and through you,
to and through you,
love

Art



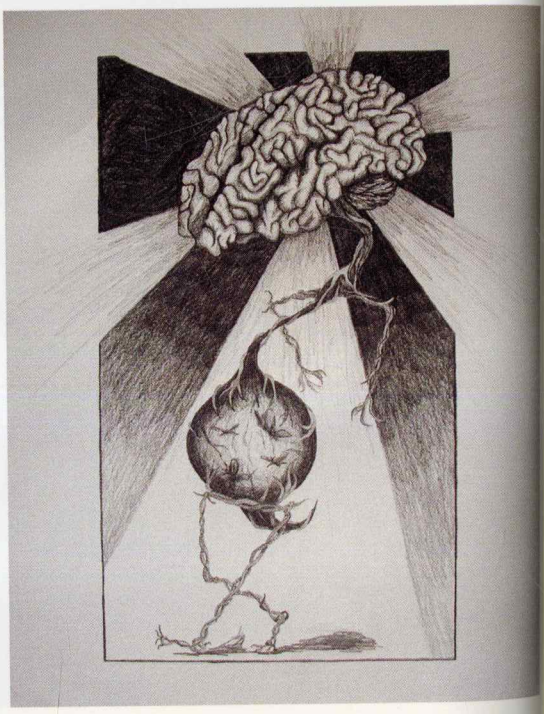


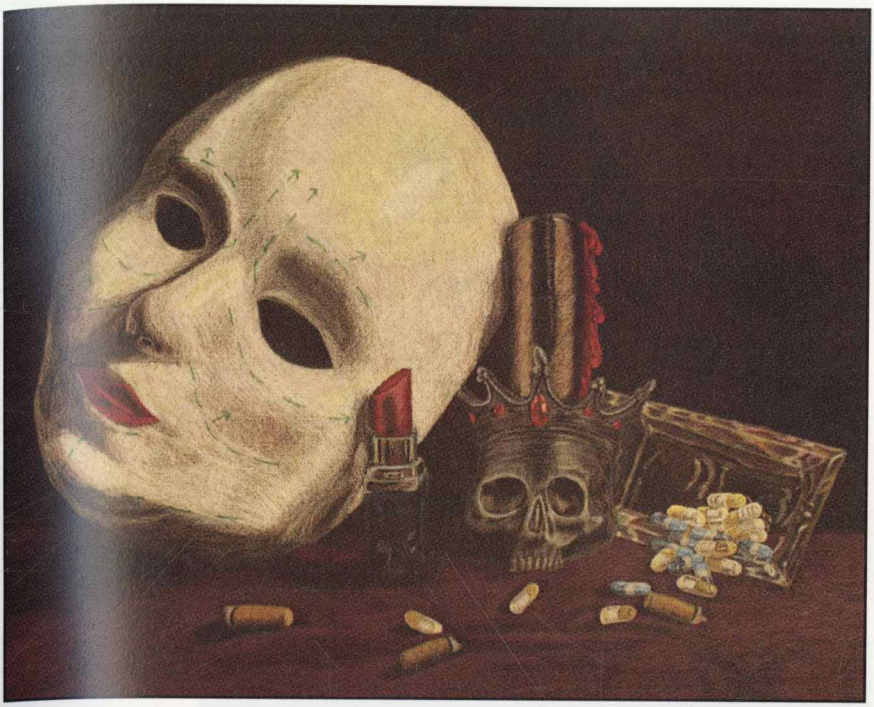
Rachel Crisson
Untitled
Untitled
Photography

Rachel Hall

Bill Murray the Philosopher
Charcoal and India I

Brainboy
Pencil

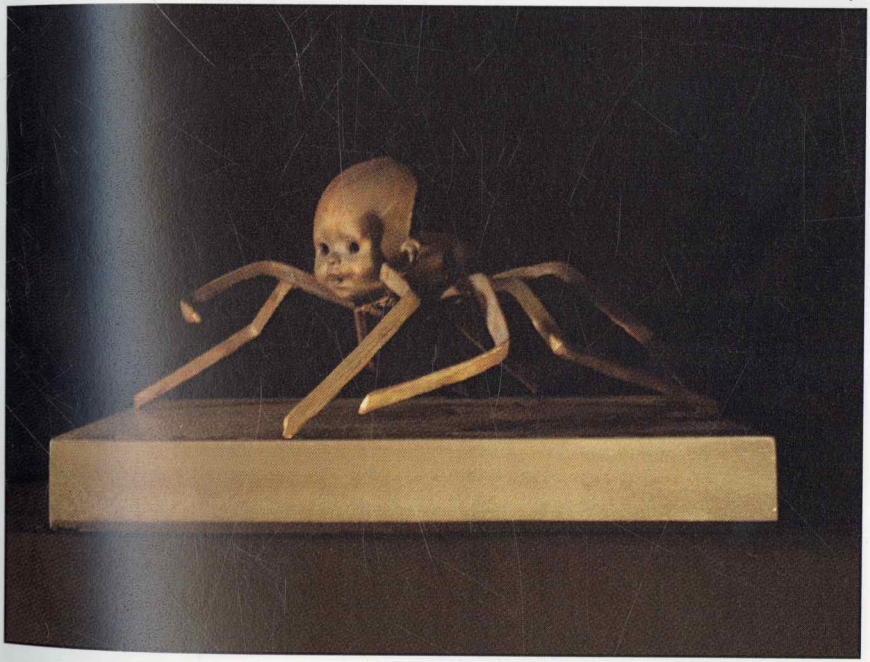




Modern Vanitas

Carolyn Fain

Spider Baby



Carolyn Fain

Two Faces

Raven Crucifiction

Mayan Jaguar

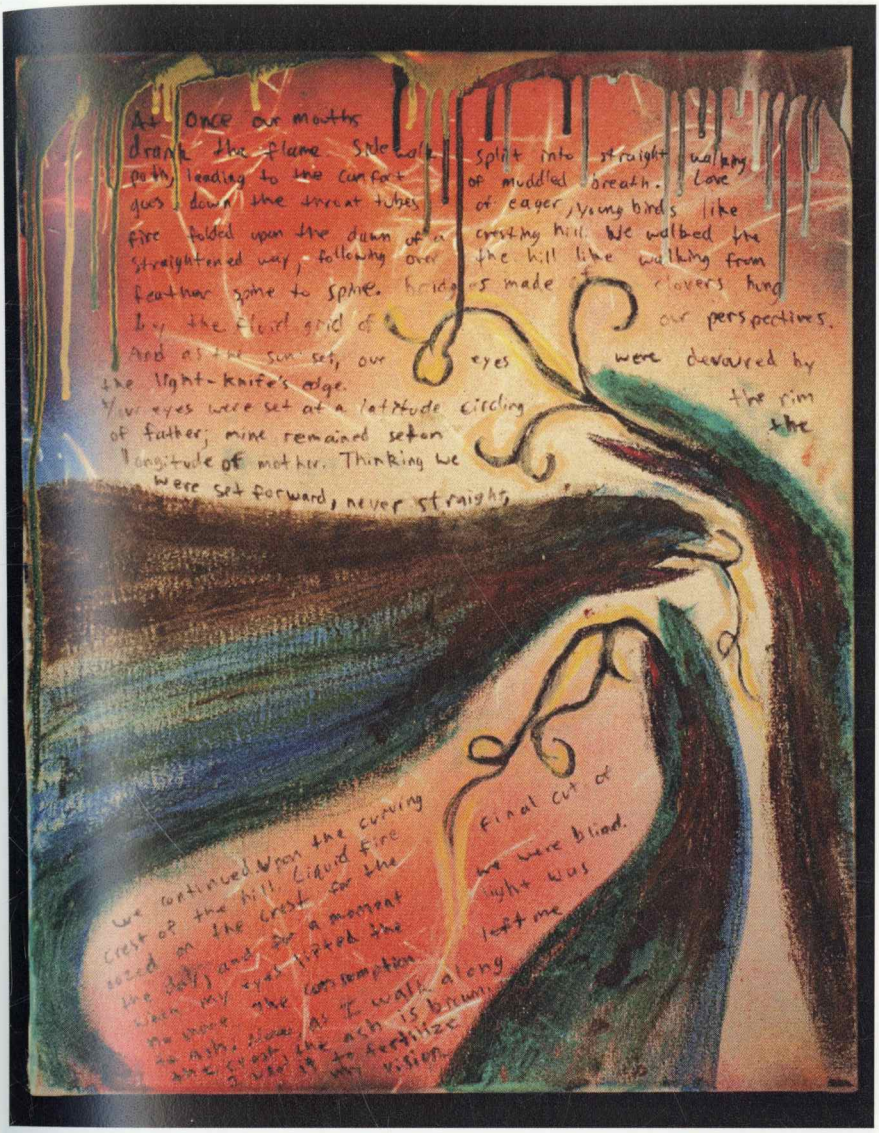
Tara Vines

Peacock

Tara Vines

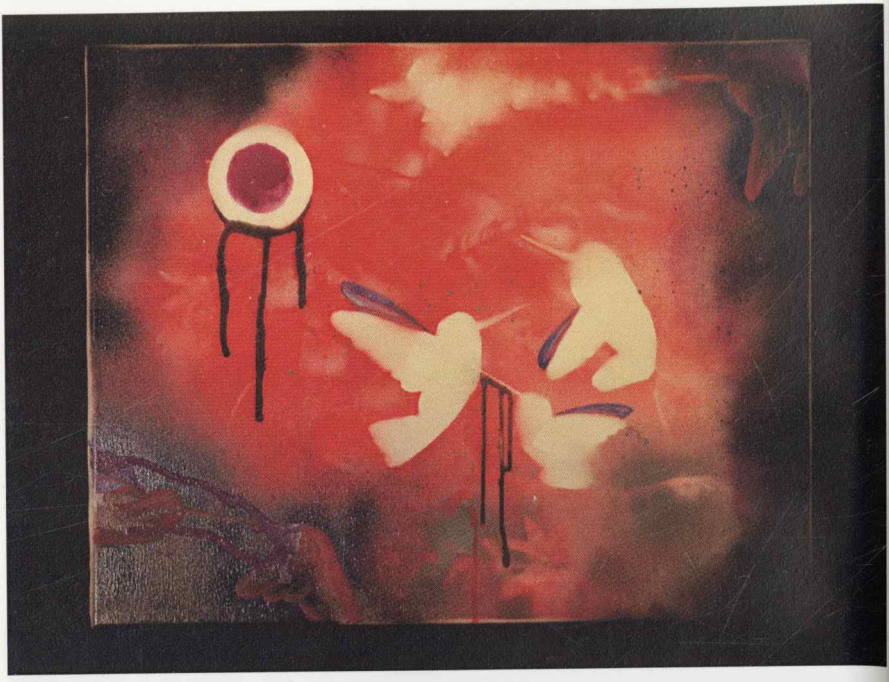
Still Life

Zebra


At once our mouths
drank the flame. Spiderlike
path, leading to the confetti
gush down the throat tubes.
fire folded upon the dawn of a
straightened way, following over
feather spine to spine.
by the fluid grid of
And as the sun set, our
the light-knife's edge.
Our eyes were set at a latitude circling
of father; mine remained seton
longitude of mother. Thinking we
were set forward, never straight
split into straight walking
of muddled breath. Love
of eager, young birds like
cresting hill. We walked the
the hill like walking from
bridges made of
lovers hung
our perspectives.
eyes
were devoured by
the rim
the
We continued upon the curving
crest of the hill. Liquid fire
oozed on the crest for the
the Self) and for a moment
clench my eyes tipped the
no more. the consumption
to ash. Now as I walk along
and sweat the ash is brown
I used to feathize
my vision.
final cut of
we were blind.
light was
left me

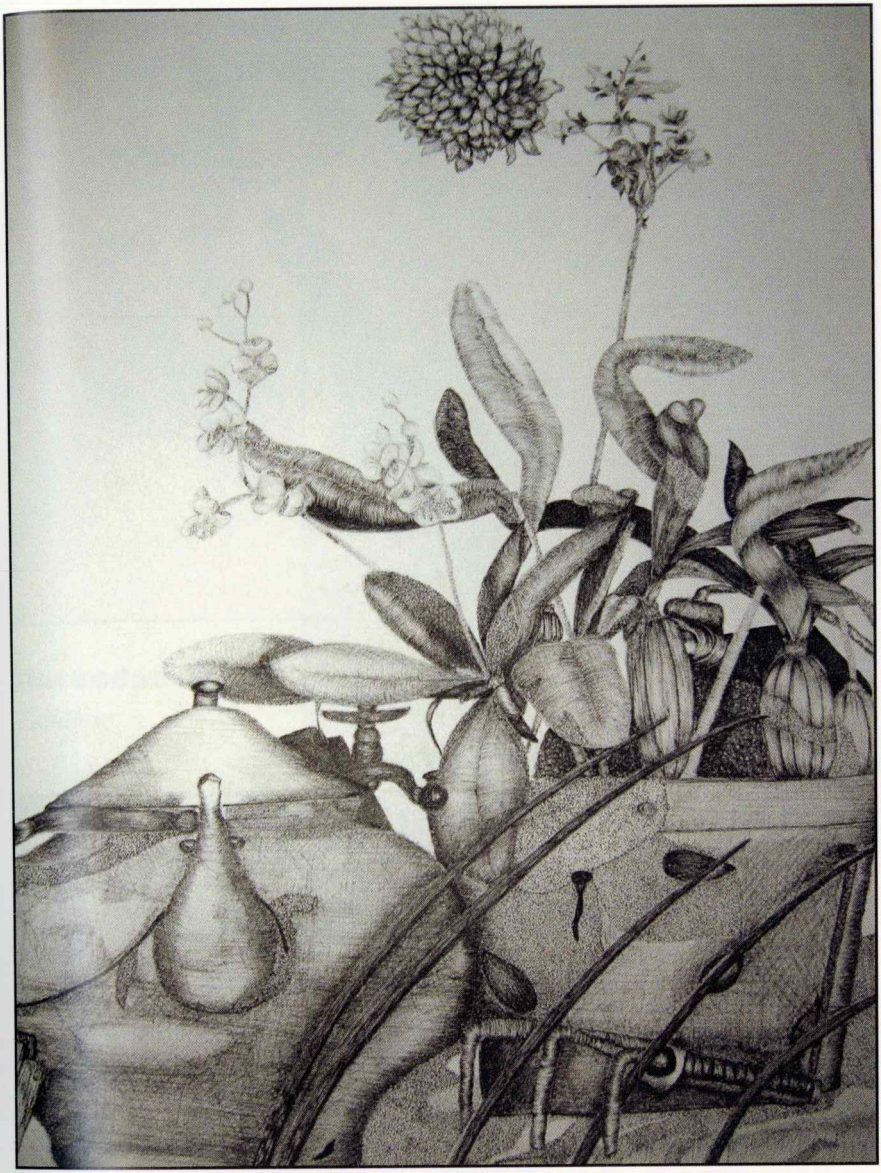
Evan Patton

Horizon Kyklos



Evan Patton
Marginal Behavior

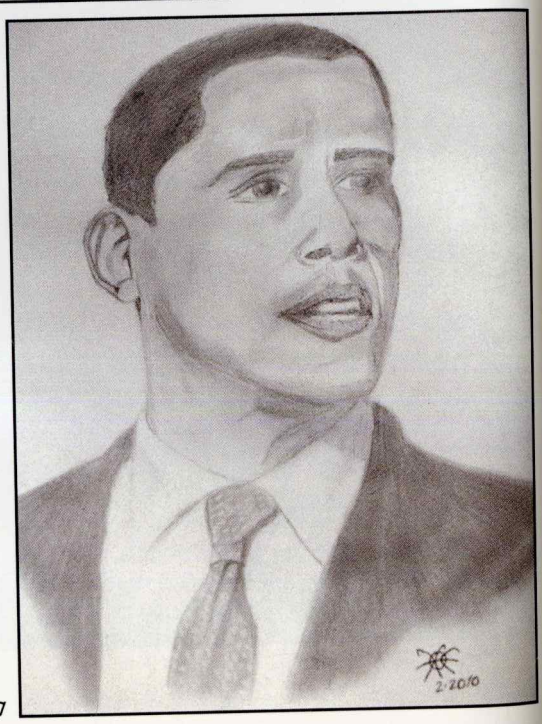
Charlette Simmons
Untitled



Charlette Simmons
Untitled

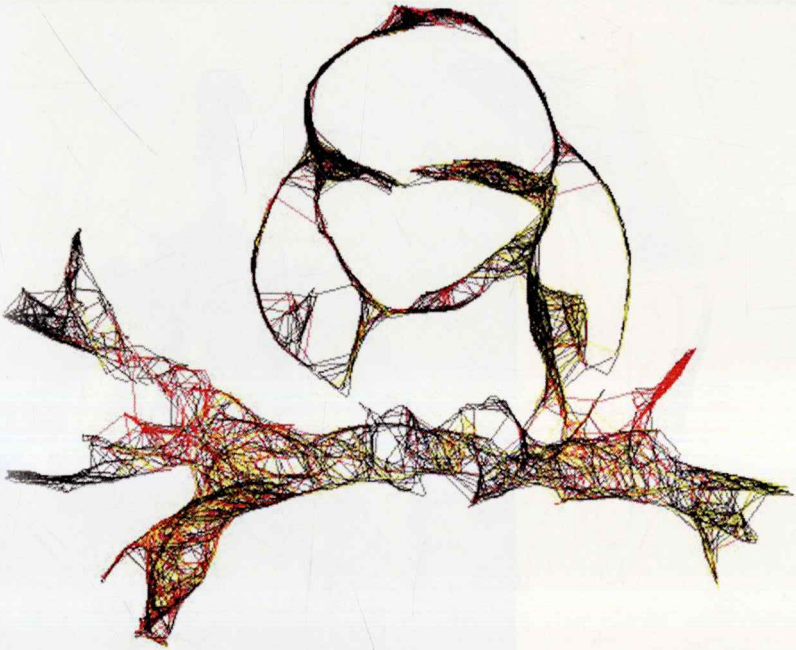
Dan Cook

MLK, JR

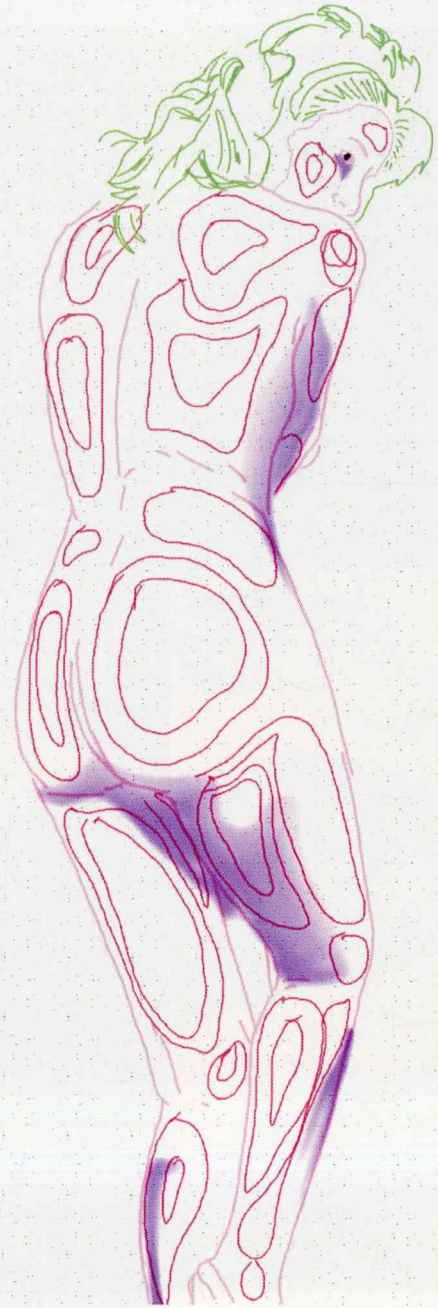


President Obama

Mercedes Jones
Timeline



Loran Murphy
Twit

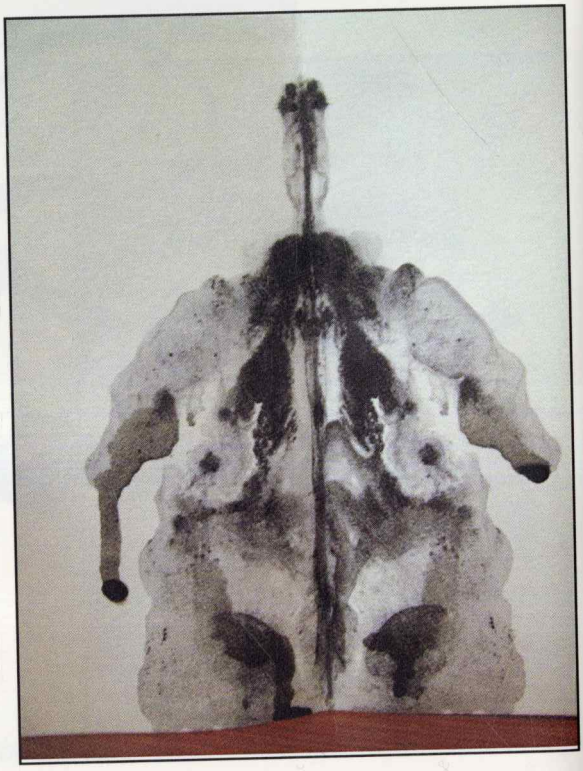


Loran Murphy

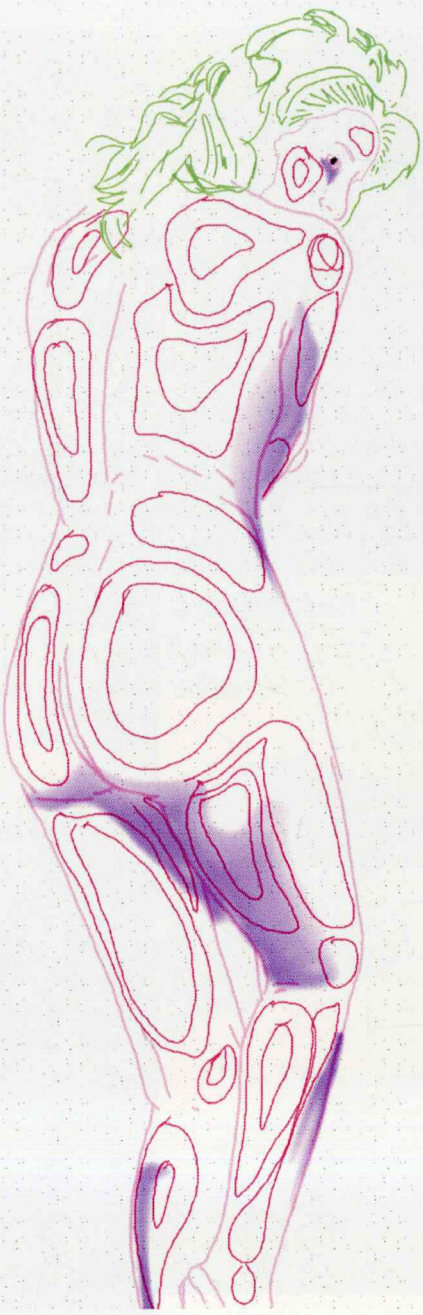
Shoes
Digital Art

Untitled
Digital Art

Loran Murphy
SanFan



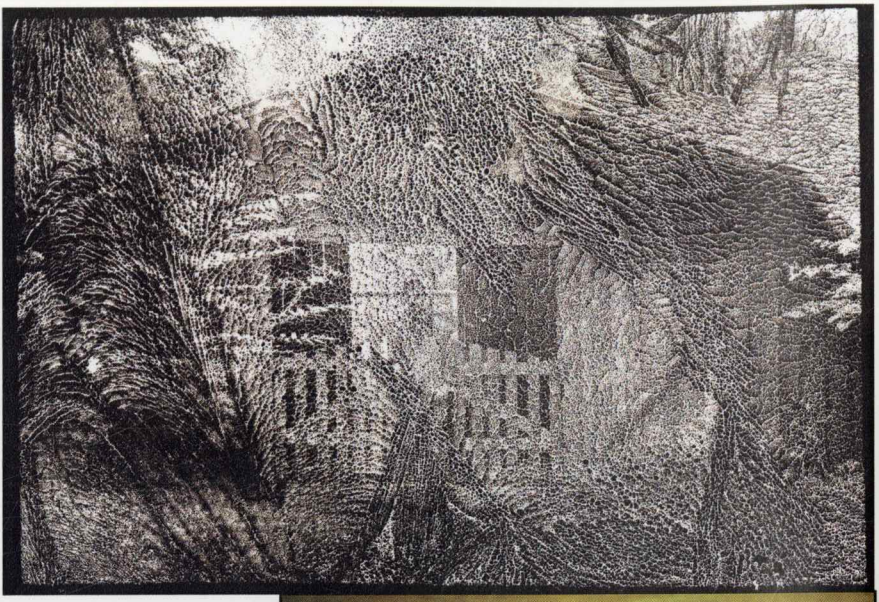
Untitled
Ink



Loran Murphy

Shoes
Digital Art

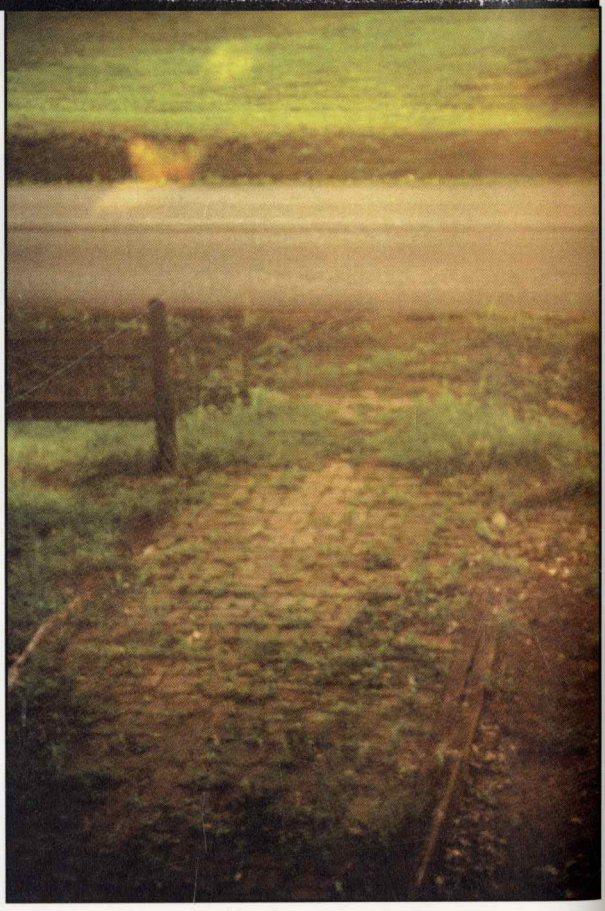
Untitled
Digital Art

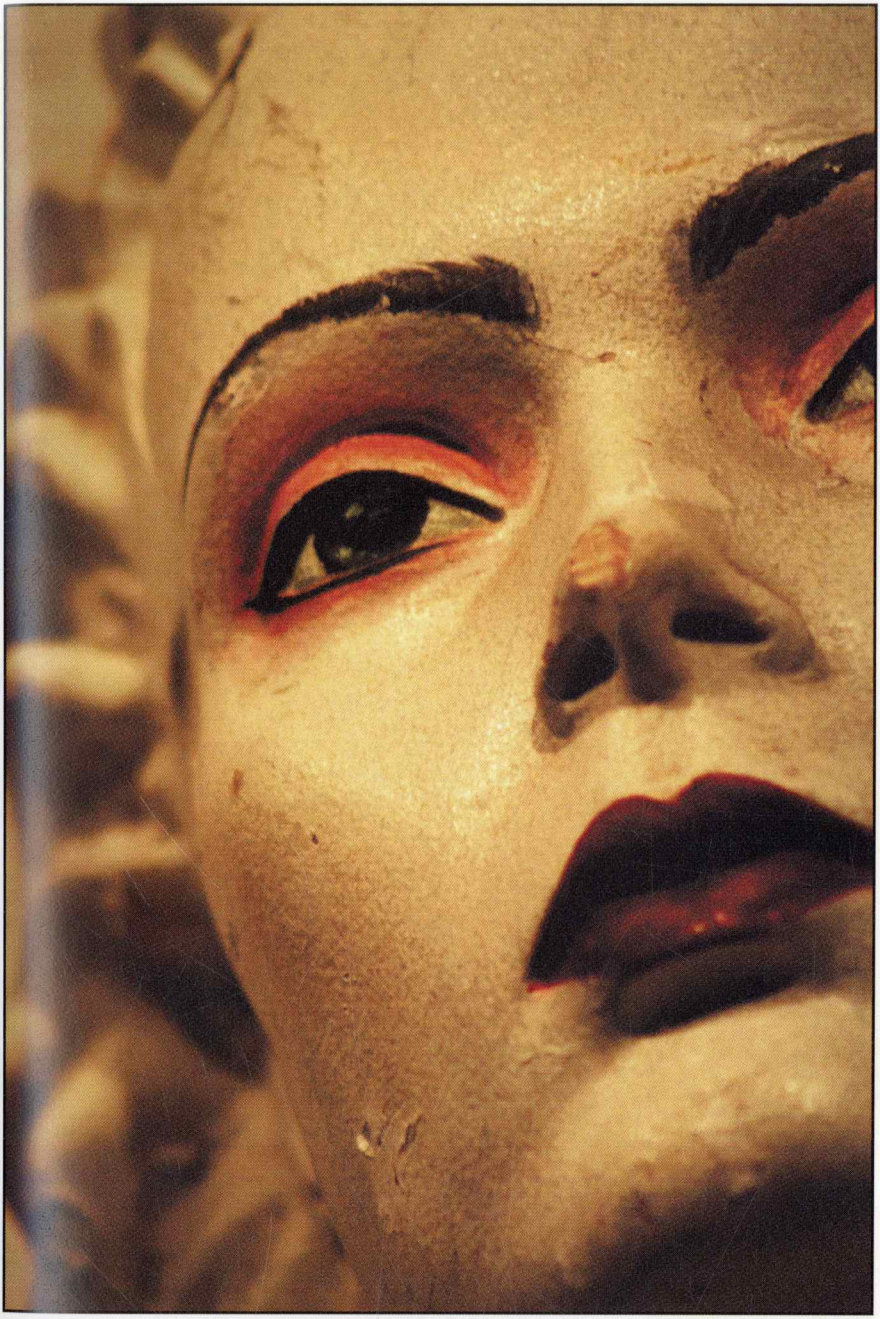


Sarah Dunn

Untitled

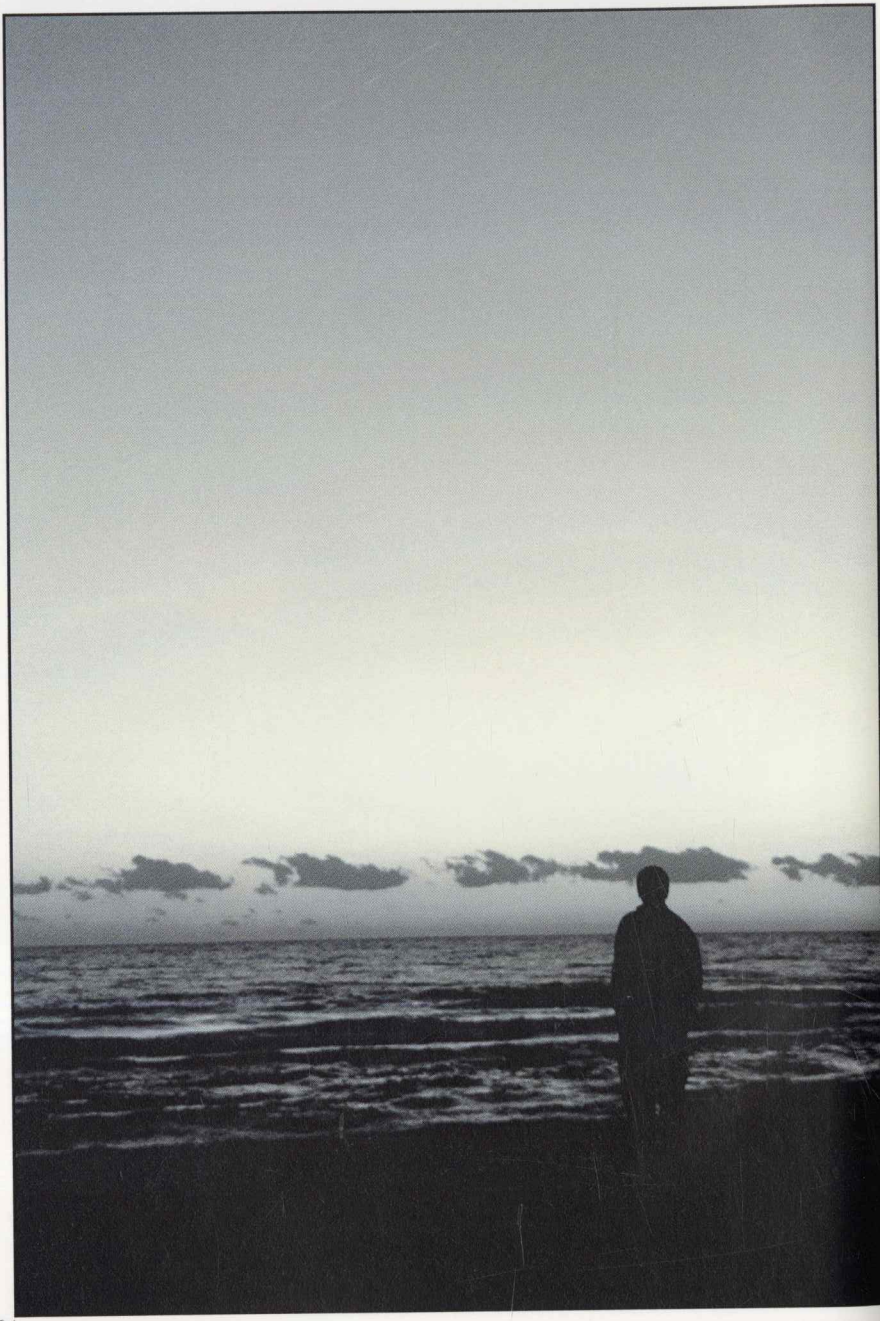
Untitled



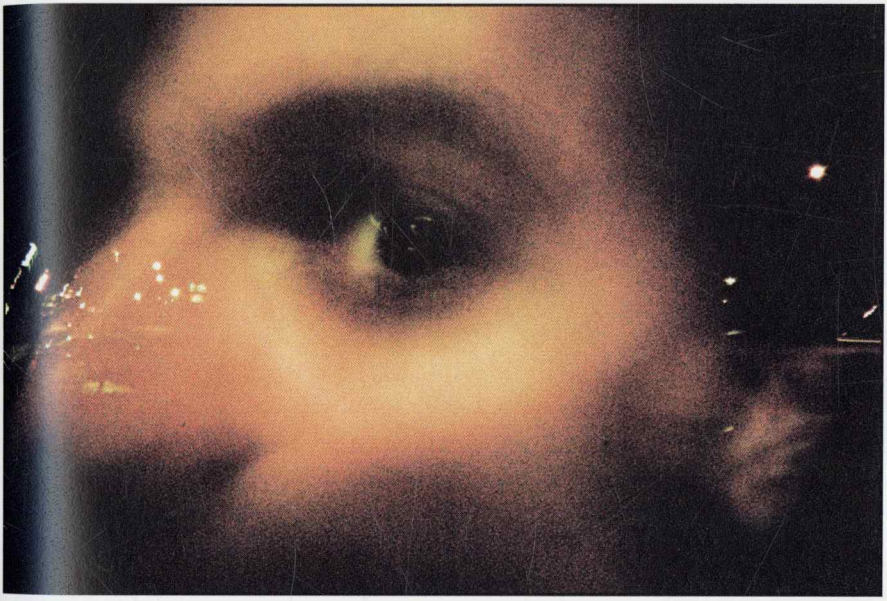


Sarah Dunn
Untitled

Kily Payne
Between the Three



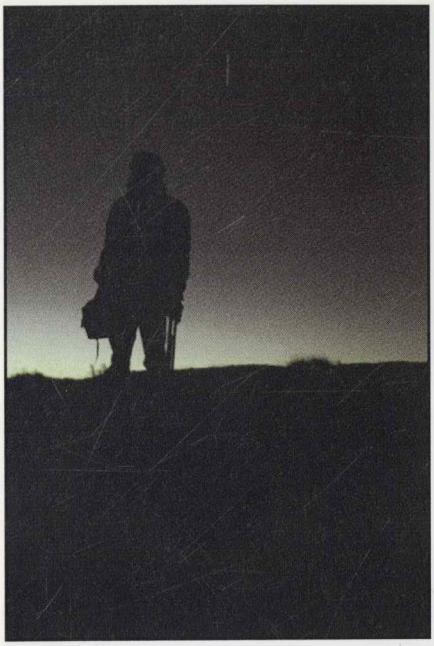
Barbed Wire and Berries



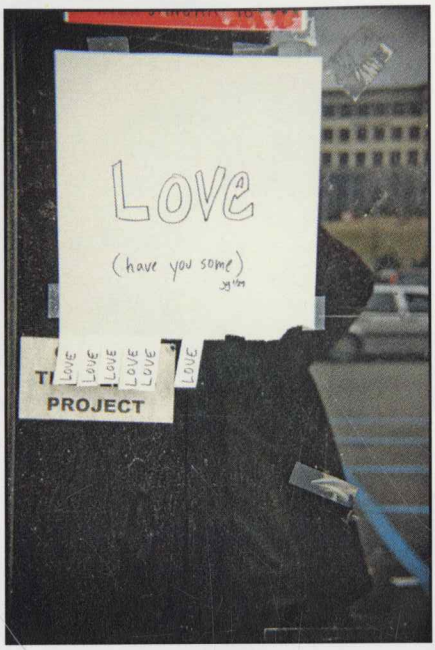
Look

Kily Payne

...and waiting

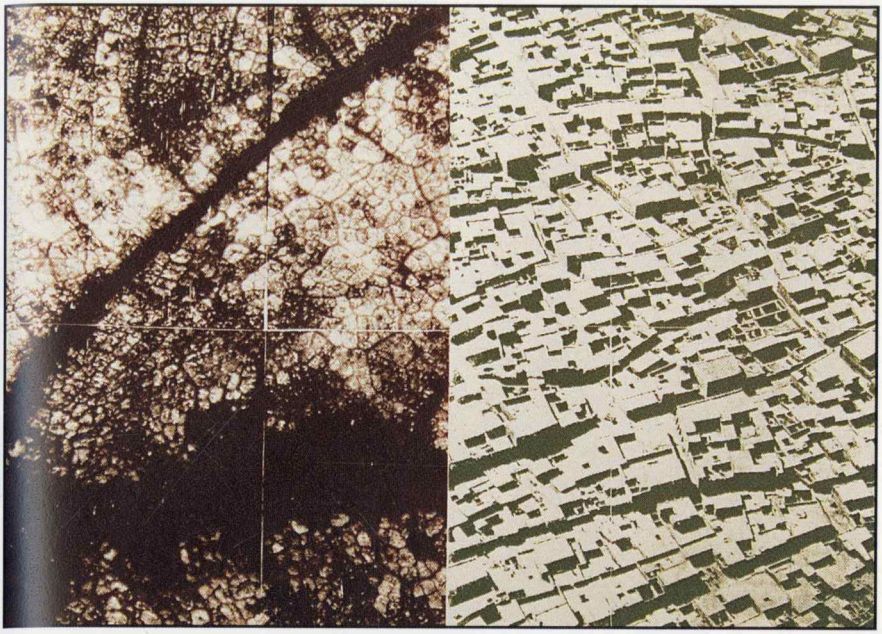


Love

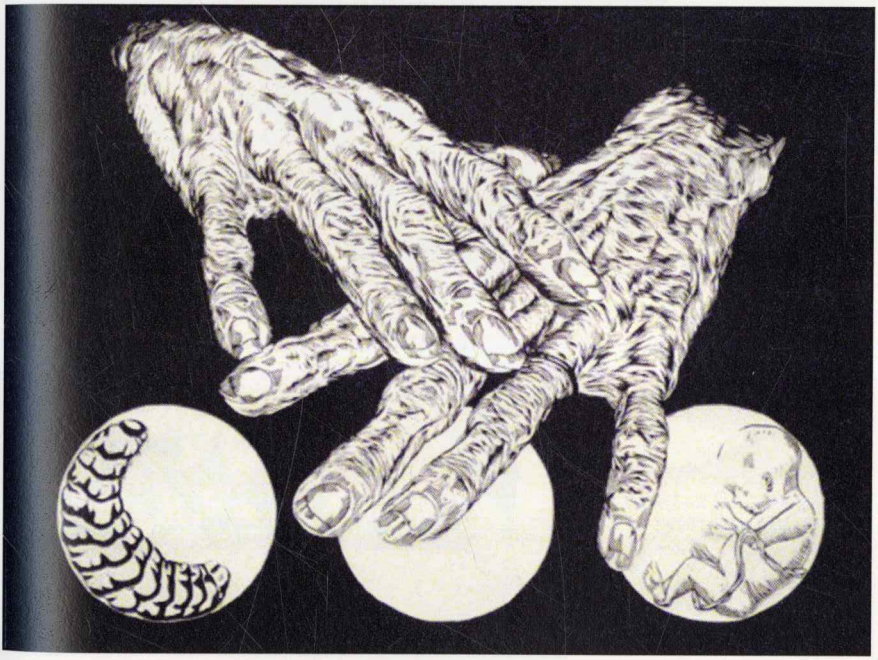


Personalities

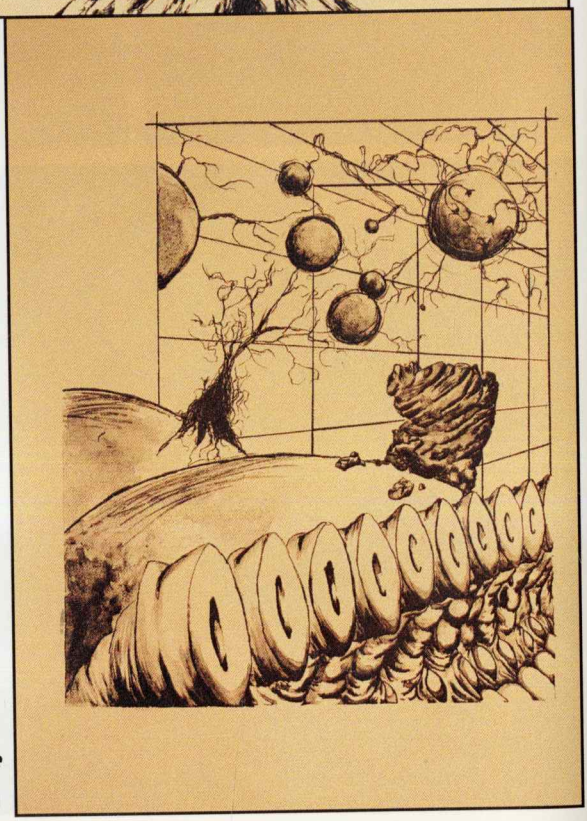
Lauren Simon *Macro vs. Micro* Screenprint



West Finlayson *Untitled* Large Relief Print

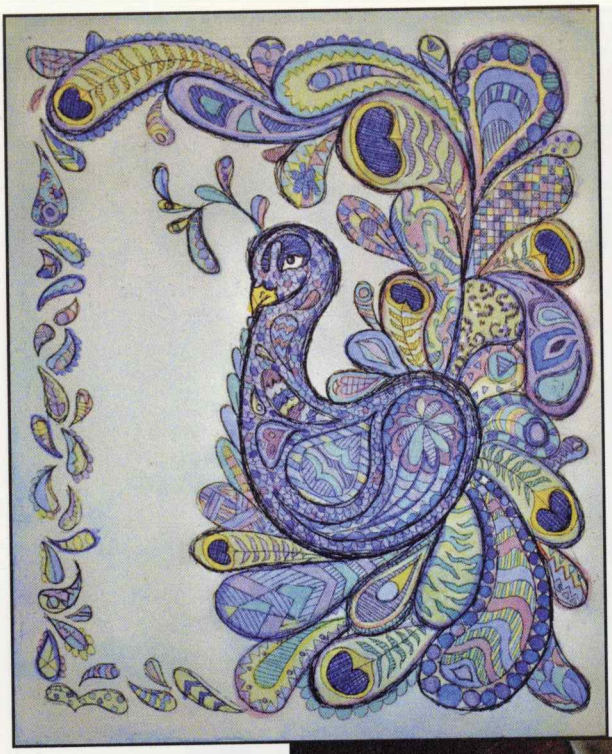


West Finlayson
Out on the Boll Weevils
Silkscreen

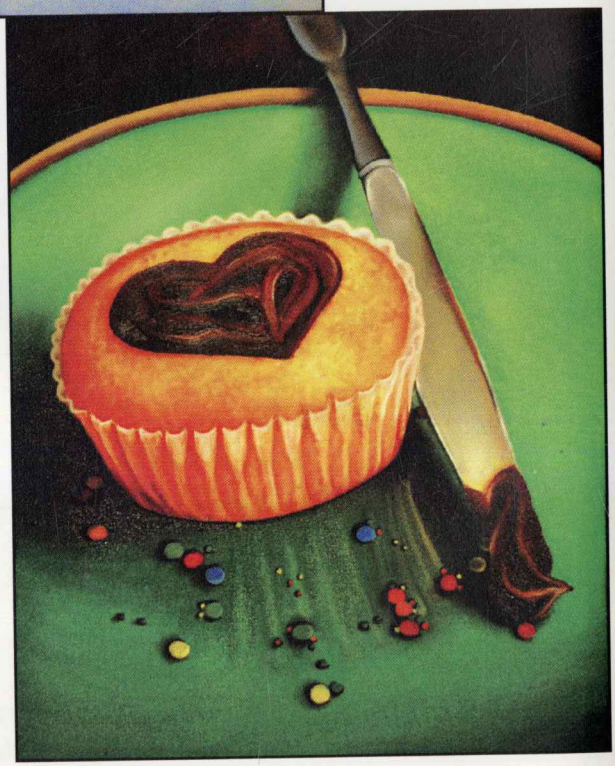


A Valley Turns Alone
Lithograph

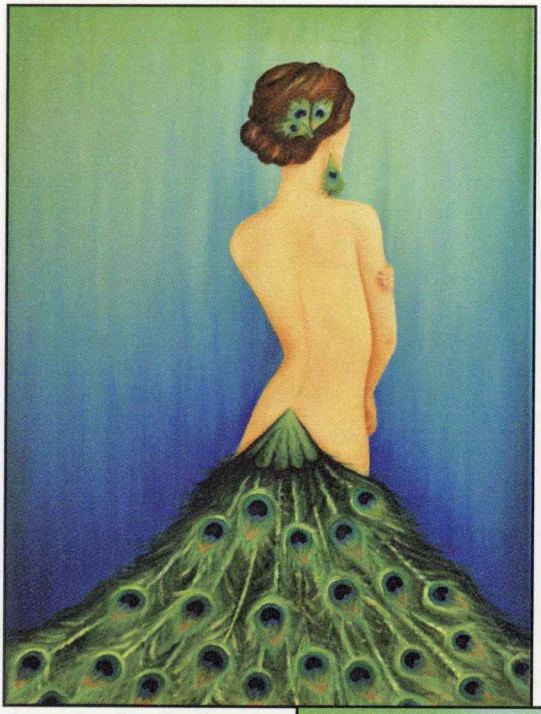
West Finlayson
A Parable Circumcision
Lithograph



Janessa Mobley
Paisley Peacock
Etching w/ Watercolor



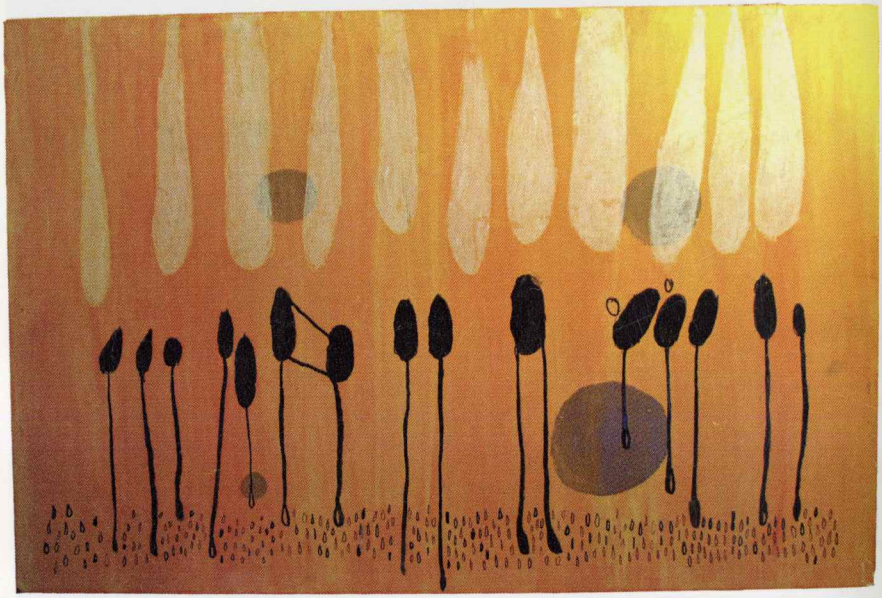
The Marriage
Oil on Canvas



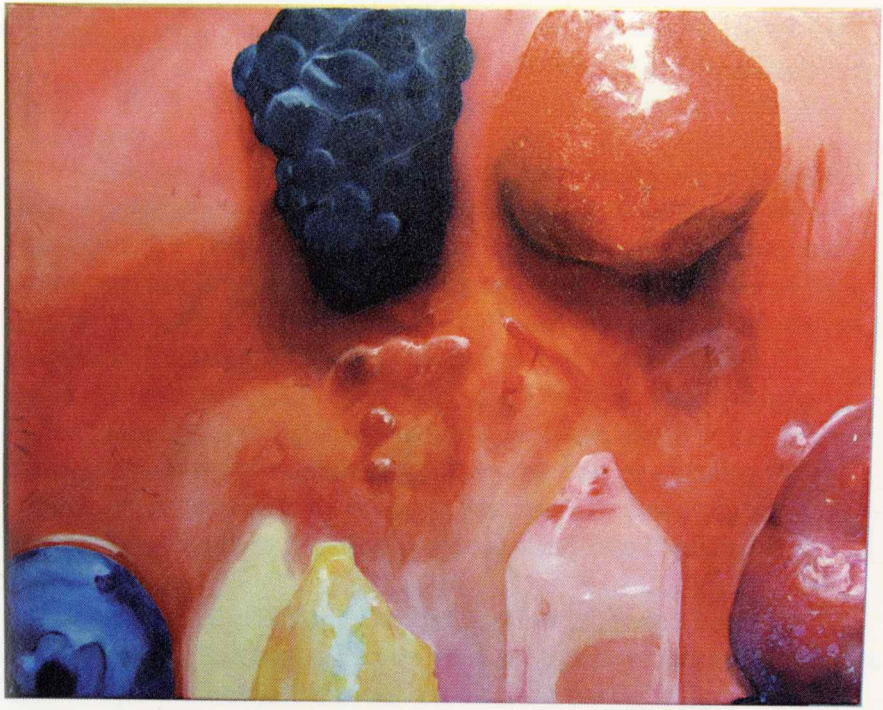
Janessa Mobley
Metaphoric Self-Portrait
Oil on Canvas

Untitled
Chalk Pastel

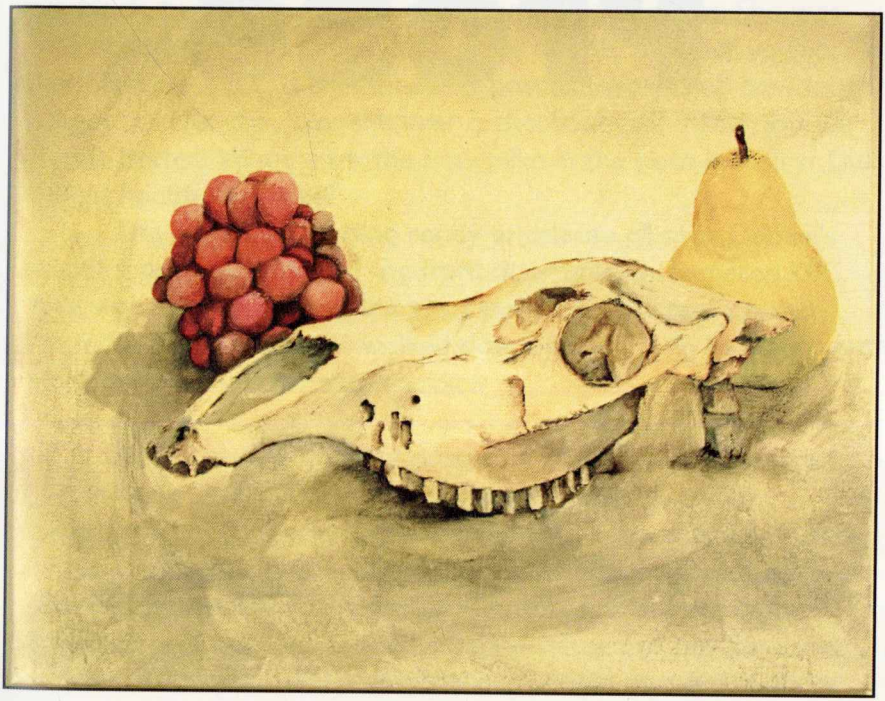
Travis Swinford
Being and Going



Major-minor Sprout



Travis Swinford *Honey in Unison*



Night Life

Prose

Jayce Cosper

The Tan Crayon

When I first discovered my brother's vast porn collection, I was shocked. I mean, we were hardcore Baptists. Brother Jeffrey, our Sunday School teacher, was very clear: porn was wrong and immoral. Yet here were these videotapes in our closet, behind his stuffed Hulk Hogan and Macho Man Randy Savage dolls. A den of sin amongst forgotten spelling tests and forgotten crayons. The titles did amuse me, however: Backseat Driver 5, Double Back Door Debbie, Sugartits Revisited. I knew I was alone in the house. Mom was buying groceries or walking the dog or cleaning the church or picking up my asthma medication. Dad was cheering Daniel on at football practice. It was just me and Double Back Door Debbie.

Double Back Door Debbie had fire truck red hair and porcelain skin. She had a sizable mole on the inner part of her thigh, and I hoped it was just a mole and not the earlier stages of skin cancer (my mom was a sunscreen whore). She had four costars, two black, two white, all with abnormally large penises. She was quite skilled; she took two men into her mouth, then her vagina, then her back door. It all seemed so painful. I wondered how much she got paid for this. Was she ever a checkout girl? Which job did she like better? What were the hours like in the porn industry? Did she get health insurance?

The men were getting ready to release all over Debbie's beautiful skin when I heard the front door unlatch. I smelled KFC. Mom was home. I pressed the eject button on the remote and popped in Forrest Gump. I walked downstairs to help Mom get out the paper plates. I was extra helpful.

About ten months had passed since I'd first encountered Double Back Door Debbie. I was fourteen now, my brother seventeen. My initial guilt and multiple trips to the altar at church waned. I masturbated usually twice a day, sometimes more. It was something to do. Daniel had football practice, baseball practice, basketball practice. I was bored. My dad refused to pay for dance lessons so I recorded TRL everyday and taught myself the dance moves. I would try to memorize parts of the World Almanac. I used

my ever-extensive knowledge of the world and my mad dance and hosting skills to put on shows in the attic. I'd set up the tripod and read from the script I'd worked on the night before, rarely talking about politics, usually celebrity gossip and rehashed Letterman bits.

One Thursday I was in the middle of a great rendition of Nsync's "Bye, Bye, Bye," and I realized while I was trying to do both the Justin and JC parts that Joey, Chris, and Lance were missing in my interpretation. I'd called Steven, my best friend, and, per usual, he was tardy. He said he would be here at seven.

He wasn't there at seven. How rude; I had even agreed to do his history paper for him in exchange for his dance moves. Everyone at my house was at a basketball game. I "had homework" so I didn't have to go. Mom left pizza money on the counter. I pocketed the money and ate Hot Pockets. I paced aimlessly around the house. I went to mine and Daniel's bedroom, the attic. I studied the capitals of South America in my almanac. I paced. I went over to Daniel's side of the room, which was so typically decorated with trophies and medals. I had few medals but lots of clips from magazines of various pop culture icons: Princess Diana, Anna Nicole Smith, Fiona Apple, Britney Spears, Julianne Moore. With the exception of Diana, most were provocative pictures. Daniel only had a poster of Gisele Bündchen, so my side of the room was obviously more hetero. I looked at his trophies: Daniel Fielding, All County Basketball, Most Improved, MVP. The dates ran all through the nineties and the most recent ones were downstairs in a newly installed case.

His clothes were piled high in his hamper. Mom was slacking. On top was a pile of crumpled plaid boxers, the kind that button in front. I immediately pictured my brother in the boxers, reading aloud from Macbeth or playing Playstation. He certainly had an athletic body; he'd stretch toward the ceiling and I could see tiny bits of pubic hair escaping their confinement. He always slept in just boxers and socks. I slept in shorts, a shirt, and no socks.

The boxers peered up at me, apparently missing their owner. I would miss perfection, too. He played all the sports and was also smart, which I never appreciated because that was supposed to be my thing. I took them in my hand, feeling the smooth cotton. Sweat beads formed on my forehead (it was always hot in the attic). I turned the boxers inside out and brought them to

my nose. I inhaled deeply, like the inhale of a woman in an allergy medication commercial, running happily through a field with her dog. The underwear had the faint smell of sweat and of a freshly cleaned indoor pool: dried semen. I felt badly for my mom, who did our laundry. Living with three guys, I guess she ignored it. I was polite; I used Kleenex to clean up my mess.

I smelled again. I reached into my shorts and brought my hand up to my nose. The smells were comparable but his smell was mustier. He sweated more than me. I laid the boxers back down in the hamper. I picked up his copy of Macbeth, laid it back down. I'd been reading it because one can never be too far ahead. I'd have to read it in two years so I had a good head start. I liked Lady Macbeth. I returned to the hamper and reached in again. I unbuttoned the button, put the boxers back, and went downstairs.

I turned on the television and watched Wheel of Fortune. The people on there are retarded. I always get the puzzle before them, and I'm fourteen. Jesus Christ, I thought. I wasn't getting any younger. And a watched clock never strikes, or something like that. It was 7:45. I started up the stairs. They creaked. I was halfway up the stairs when Steven walked through the door. "Hey, fag!"

"I didn't think you were coming. What's up?" I asked.

"What's on TV?"

"I think Friends is about to come on."

"What about COPS?"

"That comes on Saturday night."

"What about MTV Cribs?"

"Wednesday. So the reason I invited you over here. I need you to be my Joey Fatone." I gestured for him to come up to the attic. He stared at the television, to Vanna White clapping incessantly with the mute on. His eyes were baggy and puffy, as if he were perpetually stoned, which he wasn't. He looked like Droopy the animated basset hound.

"Fuck that. I got a better idea."

"Well, I thought you were coming over so I could do your history project. Could you at least be the girls who are not Beyoncé in Destiny's Child?"

He rummaged into his cargo pants pockets, revealing a full pint of Aristocrat vodka. "Sometimes it's good to have alcoholic parents," he said.

"Don't be dramatic. If they were real alcoholics, they'd miss that shit." He came upstairs, we drank.

"Well, did you hear Courtney Templeton got fingered by Johnny Ramirez?" he asked, passing the bitter vodka over to me. I had to stop myself from gagging every time I swallowed. "She's two years younger than him and he's a fucking spick. People like that should be shot. I mean, she totally fucking wanted me, and I even let her touch my dick at the fall festival. Now, look what the nasty bitch has done. God, I hate sluts."

"Yeah, sluts suck," I said, feeling the burn from the alcohol in my stomach. I offered to make him a tuna sandwich.

"Tuna's for fags." I winced at the word. He continued: "I want a banana and peanut butter Rocky Road mix, like last week," he said.

"We don't have any ice cream. You ate it all and Mom was pissed."

"Well, don't offer shit to people if you don't want them to have it." He had a point. I went downstairs and made him a banana and peanut butter sandwich, myself a tuna. When I returned to the attic, Double Back Door Debbie was working her magic through my and Daniel's VCR. Steven was massaging himself through his shorts.

"Here's food." I laid the plates down beside him.

"I'm not hungry. Come here, buddy." I did, he put my hand on his crotch.

We'd started all this about six months prior. It just sort of happened. I was showing him the tape, Double Back Door Debbie in all her glory, and he told me he was getting really hot. I offered to turn the air on. I looked down; he was erect. We jerked off together that day, and subsequent days. I always fought the urge to look over at him as he pounded away. Most of the time I managed to resist. One time I looked right at him as he climaxed and he called me a fag. I pulled my pants up and left the room, very nearly crying. But we continued on, together, silently and intensely, sometimes coming at the same time, sometimes not even close. We always told each other when we were almost there. One day, he kept looking over at me, smiling. I tried to concentrate on Debbie. He kept staring. "Shit! What?" I managed.

"Touch it," he said. I was hesitant. Leviticus, Corinthians, Jerry

Falwell, Sunday School, my dad. "I can't, Steve. We can't. You know. It's wrong."

"I see you looking at me, dude, and I should kick your ass," he sighed. "Just fucking touch it."

I gave in. I started slow, then fast. "Yeah," he moaned. I looked up at him. He directed his eyes toward his penis. "No," I said. He gently nudged my head down with his right hand. I wasn't that difficult to manipulate.

I darted my eyes to the left, mimicking Debbie's methods. Steven put his hand on the back of my head like the man in the porno. He kept pushing me down further and further; I gagged and my eyes watered. I looked up at him. He had his other hand in his mouth, biting his finger. He looked at the ceiling, then the porno, then me. He looked back at the ceiling and played with my hair. I felt a little awkward doing it, but I guess that's how anyone would feel the first time they have a penis in their mouth. We continued for about ten minutes. Steven started convulsing and moaning louder. We were in the attic where no one could hear, but jeez, calm down, I thought. "Yeah, buddy, yeah buddy," he'd say. He pushed my head all the way down; bittersweet snot went to the back of my throat. I swallowed. He released his grip on my head. "That was weird," he said.

"Yeah, I know." I rose and went to brush my teeth.

So here I was again, doing the same thing. It was part of our routine and now seemed normal. We'd watch television, play HORSE, make videos, and engage in oral sex. I never asked him to return the favor and he never volunteered. I grew to appreciate the taste so I didn't brush my teeth afterward anymore.

He'd ejaculated. "So we just have to do a biographical essay of anyone we've studied this semester," he said, pulling up his pants and fastening his belt. I took another sip of the vodka, my mouth feeling numb and acrid.

"Have you studied Marie Antoinette?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"I'll do her. Now about my video—"

"Fuck that. I'm tired of dancing. It's gay. I'll do some stand-up."

"Your jokes suck," I said, gauging his mildly dejected expression. "I mean, they're okay but I feel like they're not crossing

over to a broader audience."

"Dude, your audience is your mom and Daniel."

My dad stopped watching after one show. It was my first show and the camera work was admittedly sloppy, but I just think my interpretation of Spice Girls' "Wannabe" was entirely too cerebral for him. My mom nodded enthusiastically, the way she does at church, occasionally looking over to see Dad's reaction. Daniel gave me a standing ovation. At least someone in this family knew talent when they saw it.

"So you're gonna be the other members. I'll be JC."

"I don't want to. Let's watch TV."

"Please?" I asked. I heard rumblings from downstairs: keys jingling, doors closing. Loud, angry thuds came barreling up the stairs. Daniel's team had lost.

He came in the room and laid his duffel bag on his bed. He waved at Steven.

"Did ya'al win?" Steven asked.

"Naw," he said. His hair was greasy from sweating. He took off his jersey top and grabbed a dirty shirt from the hamper. The plaid boxers landed on the floor and he put them back. "We lost by like twenty points."

"Daniel!" my dad's voice boomed from downstairs. "Come down."

Daniel opened the door. "For why?" he asked.

"We have to watch this game," Dad said. He was halfway up the stairway with Daniel peering down at him.

"I just played the fucking game," I heard him mumble. Steven smiled.

"What?" Dad asked.

"Can I shower first?"

"Make it quick."

Daniel went downstairs and showered and I continued the conversation I'd been having with Steven. I was getting nowhere. He was retiring from background dancing. I imagined a tornadic wind coming in at that moment and grabbing him out of the window, tossing his limp body from tree to tree, nails eviscerating his skin, shrapnel cutting his legs into pieces, his beady eyes filled with blood and horror, knowing he was about to die.

Dad called us downstairs. I'd fucking missed a new episode

of Friends.

The smell of popcorn, which would remain in the house all night, floated in the room. My mom and Steven exchanged greetings. I shared a bowl of popcorn with him. I was a little buzzed from the vodka.

Mom did the video recording, but you could hear Dad on every single play, cursing loudly. Dad would occasionally stop the video. "What were you thinking here, son? Why didn't you block 14?"

"I don't know. I didn't think he had a shot from that far."

"Well, do you see your mistakes?" Dad asked.

"Yeah." Daniel slumped down in the chair. My mom patted him on the head. She had her hair up in a blue and white scrunchie, our school colors. She was a good camera woman. I admired the angles she captured, even with Dad occasionally rising from his seat in excitement, nearly pummeling her and the camera. Some parts looked like The Blair Witch Project.

"You let that nigger get right past you."

Daniel rolled his eyes without actually rolling his eyes. "Yeah."

"How did you miss that shot?"

"I was nervous. You know I'm not that great at basketball."

Dad took this as backtalk. His tone rose: "I can see that, son."

"You'll win the next one," Mom said.

"Yeah, but they won't go to the championships now. Not after this," Dad said.

"That was an awesome play right there, Daniel," Steven said.

"Thanks."

I watched the game in silence, eating popcorn which Steven had put too much salt on. I didn't have a background dancer and I fucking missed Friends. By the time the game ended I no longer had a buzz.

Steven left after the game, telling me he'd find a way to pay me back for doing his history paper. I told him he could just give me the rest of the vodka and he agreed.

Mom and Dad were getting ready for bed. Dad placed the game in a row of videotapes of Daniel's games. I went upstairs and started hand-writing Steven's essay, using a book I'd bought as a

thrift store as my basis.

"Got any alcohol?" my brother asked, closing the door behind him and taking off his shirt.

"Yeah. It's in my sock drawer."

He got the bottle and took a large drink. He handed the bottle to me and I did the same. We passed it back and forth. "You look really good out there out on the court."

"Nah, I suck. I'm just ready for baseball."

"It's just a game, remember."

He looked at his trophies. "My life is just a game. I fucking hate him."

"Dad?" I asked. "At least he notices you."

Daniel fiddled with the hair on his nipples. "Would you want him to notice you more?"

"No. I don't guess."

"I don't see how Mom puts up with his shit."

"She could have it worse. We all could." I gave the bottle to Daniel.

"What did Steven want?"

"The usual," I replied. I wondered if Daniel noticed anything on nights Steven slept over.

"What? For you to do his homework? Why do you let him treat you like that? Call you fag and shit?"

"Your friends call you fag. Everybody calls everybody fag, fag."

"It's not cool, bro."

"Yeah. Do you have practice tomorrow?"

"Yep. Coach is probably gonna make us run drills for losing. I just want to quit." He tipped the bottle upside-down, getting the very last drop. I was seeing double and I'm sure he felt pretty good, too.

"Well, just come by and pick me up after you get out. I got detention."

"You got detention? For what?"

"Some bullshit." I told him the story. My English teacher, Ms. Greer, encouraged me to audition for The Crucible. I don't know why she thought I'd be good, as I'd thoroughly lambasted the play during our in-class discussion. Most people just read from the play, which I found boring, like the play itself. Rejecting Arthur Miller

altogether (and really, who wouldn't?), I did a monologue from the new American classic, Cruel Intentions: "Eat me, Sebastian! It's okay for guys like you and Court to fuck everyone. But when I do it, I get dumped for innocent little twits like Cecile. God forbid, I exude confidence and enjoy sex. Do you think I relish the fact that I have to act like Mary Sunshine 24/7 so I can be considered a lady? I'm the Marcia fucking Brady of the Upper East Side, and sometimes I want to kill myself. So there's your psychoanalysis, Dr. Freud. Now tell me, are you in... or are you out?"

It was such a good audition I was shaking when I'd finished. Sarah Michelle Gellar certainly would have approved. Unfortunately our assistant principal, who had been randomly observing in the dimly lit auditorium, did not appreciate my effort. She told me after she summoned me to her office that my audition was tasteless and profane. Profane, perhaps—but tasteless? She sits there with her piss-yellow JC Penney cardigan and she's the beacon of taste at Cloverdale High? I told her I didn't know kids from the junior high would be auditioning, that I did not find my artistic choice to be profane, nor did I know that curse words were prohibited in our auditions.

"That's awesome," Daniel said when I'd finished.

"Yeah, she's uptight because she's Mormon, which isn't even real!"

"What are you gonna tell Mom if the school calls?"

"Tardies. Mrs. Greer pulled me aside after I left Dr. Rice's office and said she enjoyed my audition but they had so many people already. She's gonna let me help decorate the set, though. I'll be doing it Monday through Wednesday starting next week."

"There you go. You'll get out of the house, meet people, it'll be fun. Better than moping around here all evening."

"I don't mope."

He laughed. "You mope."

"Hey, do you want to be my Joey Fatone?"

"No."

"Okay," I shrugged.

"I want to be Justin."

"Cool. JC's gonna be the famous one anyway." I turned on the television; Double Back Door Debbie had four penises in her. Daniel let out a loud laugh.

"Been snooping?" he smiled. I pressed eject. "It's okay. We all do it. You were gonna find this or something else sooner or later."

I popped in the videotape labeled "Nsync MTV moments." The tape was already cued up.

We watched the video several times before beginning choreography. He was a quick learner. "Maybe you could ask some of your teammates to be Lance, Joey, and Chris," I said, pounding my fists in the air.

He laughed. "I doubt they would."

Before I turned on the video camera I asked if he wanted to put a shirt on. "I'm good," he replied.

Crouch right then left. Don't wanna be a fool for you. Arm swings left, then right, fists pounding. I just wanna tell you that I've had enough. Kick toward the camera, dramatic punching gestures. Just hit me with the truth. Circle round, drop down, fist pound. Give me one good reason, baby come on. Arms stretch outwards, then in, crouch down. Twist to the right, then left, then reverse. Bye, bye. Crane neck while moving body in the other direction. It ain't no lie. More fist pounding, reversing, crotch grabbing, drop down then up. Baby bye, bye, bye.

The music was loud, as was our stomping. I'd been expecting Dad to pound on the ceiling to shut us up. We both fell down in exhaustion after the final bridge, laughing. Sweat stuck to his hairless chest, absorbing into the skin. I wiped my face with my shirt.

"That was good," I said. "You're way better than Steven." Steven didn't know half the words when he was lip-synching, and his steps were clumsy. It was an embarrassment to my program.

"Obviously," he replied, grabbing a towel to dry off, then handed it to me.

We went to bed shortly after our music video. I was very tired but couldn't seem to fall asleep. I said the same prayer three times. I hoped God appreciated repetition. Daniel, from what I could see from the red lava lamp, was tossing about in his bed. I was unsure if he was in the middle of a dream or still trying to fall asleep. Soon I had my answer as I saw his blanket rise and fall, his toes pointing out of the blanket. I watched him for a while; I looked up to the plastic glow-in-the dark stars burning brightly on the ceiling. We'd put them up together. I heard the rustling of the blanket and

his light breathing. I gave in.

I hoped he was too involved in his own masturbatory session to notice mine across the room. I looked over, mimicking his rhythm. His pace increased and so did mine. We stroked in utter symmetry. I was being as silent as possible, trying to measure my breaths. His breaths were getting shorter yet more pronounced. He was close, so was I. He let out a light, "ugh." We finished at the same time. I quietly wiped my residue on some Kleenex and threw it under my bed. He couldn't have noticed, I thought. He rolled over onto his stomach and let out a light chuckle. "Goodnight, Jack," he whispered. He fell asleep before I did.

The next morning Daniel drove me to school in Dad's old black Ford truck. I was looking at my hair in the mirror, worried that my experimental part looked more Howdy Doody than Joshua Jackson. My new glasses rounded out my face, which was good because I was at least twenty pounds overweight. I turned up the radio and he turned it back down.

"Are there any girls you like?" he asked, looking over to see me rolling my eyes. "Or boys?"

I was surprised at his candor. "I think I'm asexual." I checked my teeth for any remnants of the sausage I'd eaten for breakfast.

"You're so weird," he said, pulling into the school, looking for a decent parking spot. "Look, I was serious. You can tell me anything. About the boys, or girls, or whatever. I don't care. I'm your brother." He put the car in park.

"I know."

"Look at me." I looked at him. "I'm your brother."

"I know. Stop being so serious."

" I just don't want you to do anything crazy. You start to do something crazy you come talk to me, okay?"

"Okay," I replied, grabbing my backpack. We began to walk in separate directions and I called out, "Daniel? Thanks."

He waved and we went our separate ways.

First Period I had Annual Staff. I was in charge of the clubs sections, along with Cindy Fowler. She was ambitious like me, but I'd be damned if I let her get editor once the time came. I'd cut a bitch. I was typing out Steven's essay when the star student himself walked in, a hall pass around his neck.

"Can you come to the bathroom?" he asked. I didn't mind

blowing him at home but these clandestine school sessions just made him look greedy. I got the hall pass from Mrs. Thompson and we went to the bathroom. We instinctively checked all the stalls to make sure we were alone. I grabbed at his crotch and he backed away.

"You know last night? What we did? That has to be the last time." He'd said this before.

"You've said that before."

"I mean it. We're better than this. We need girlfriends. Last night after I left Courtney Templeton called me. We talked for forever and then she snuck out and we met up. We're talking now."

"Oh," I said. "Did you two do anything?"

"She gave me a hand job," he replied, too casually.

"Was it better than me? I mean, if you had to choose."

"I don't know. Look, you're great but this isn't working. I've been thinking about this for a while and we don't have anything in common. Courtney doesn't have anything to do with it really."

"We've been friends for three years and we've never had anything in common. So how is this different? Was she better than me?"

"Yes!" he replied. "Yes. Fuck. She's a girl, dude. We should be with girls. I like girls. You like Back Door Debbie, don't you? Get a fucking girlfriend and be normal."

"So you're normal?" my voice was becoming a screechy, like a chihuahua's.

"What we do isn't right and you know that," he said lowly.

"How is it any less of a sin with a girl? Or are you two gonna get married next week so y'all can have all the sex you want?"

"Dude, chill out. Don't take it personally. We'll still see each other at school. I've googled this. Lots of boys fool around with each other but then they grow up, fuck girls, and get married. Just chill, dude—Fuck, are you crying?" He crossed his arms.

"No! Yes. Shit. You're basically saying we can't be friends anymore because you got a hand job. What the fuck am I supposed to do?"

"You can hang out with me and Courtney from time to time. Her friends are fun. You can make new friends."

"I hate her friends, I hate her, and I hate you." He looked

concerned. I took in a deep breath. "I don't hate you." I wiped my eyes. "I don't hate you. It's cool. You're right. We're too old for this."

"I mean, we'll still see each other at school. And don't worry about that essay. Courtney's sister had an old one laying around."

"Okay," I said, grasping my state of desuetude. I was the tan crayon—the one at the bottom of the box that nobody ever used and nobody ever noticed when it got broken.

"I just have to ask—I mean, you're not going to tell anyone about this?"

He knew I couldn't implicate myself. "No, you know I won't. I'm not even mad anymore. It's cool."

"Okay. Awesome. Should we, like, hug or something?" he asked. I shook my head. "Think about what I said. I think a girl would make you happy, dude."

"So we're cool then?" I asked in the calmest voice I could manage.

"Yeah, buddy." He messed up my hair and exited the bathroom. I checked myself in the mirror. My hair looked more like Joshua Jackson.

I left and went back to First Period. Cindy Fowler was approaching me with some ideas she had for our section. I waved to her my assent and took out a sheet of paper. I had to think quickly. I had Courtney the New Come-Bucket in my Second Period History class. I started making a list, one of my favorite things to do. My list was titled: "Ways to break up The Whore and Judas." I wondered if thirty pieces of silver was worth more than a hand job.

My first choice was too low so I scratched it off. I tried to eat a Pop Tart I'd purchased earlier from the vending machine. All I could taste was the aftertaste of vodka and Steven, though I'd brushed my teeth several times since last night. My second choice was to start a rumor about Courtney and Johnny Ramirez, but I didn't think Steven would care. The pastry crumbled on my scarf and I noticed Cindy Fowler noticing me. I could possibly kill her dog and make her so depressed that she didn't want a relationship. I crinkled the wrapper up and thre it in the trash can, missing the bucket significantly. Cindy Fowler still watched me. "What?" I almost screamed. She looked back down at her computer screen. I had about seventeen options but they all seemed too light of punishments given the crime. I got up and placed the wrapper in the

trash and looked back down at my list. When taking standardized tests they always tell you to go with your first choice, and that's what I did. I went to the computer. I deleted my brilliant Marie Antoinette essay and typed out a note for Courtney. I finished eating the Pop Tart and brushed away the last of the crumbs, looking over triumphantly to Cindy Fowler, who hadn't dared to look in my direction.

The note was lying on her desk when she arrived. I'd left it and came in after her so as not to be a suspect. She turned to one of her girlfriends. "Did you see Friends last night? It was so good!"

Coach Reynolds started class. She finally picked up the note and read it. I watched her reread it, evaluating every syllable. Reynolds had just incorrectly spelled "Robespierre" on the board when Courtney raised her hand to use the bathroom. He motioned his hand toward the door and continued.

Our lessons usually consisted of us taking turns reading from the book as Reynolds looked over his playbook. We did so, and I winced as students were unable to pronounce words. I read my section of the book a little less dramatic than usual, as I was concerned about Courtney not being back yet. How long did it take to break up with someone? She never returned to class.

In between second and third periods I went to the office secretary to see what room detention would be held in, as I'd never been before. As she told me "202," I spied into Dr. Rice's office. Courtney was there. So were Steven and his mildly retarded cousin Paige. Fuck! I'd just wanted things to go back to normal with Steven and me, to have a friend. Things were getting way too serious.

At lunch, I overheard people talking at my table. I sometimes sat with Cindy Fowler but she was skipping lunch today to work on our layout, that overachieving bitch. So I sat alone. I learned that Courtney had gone into Paige's special education classroom and confronted her. Paige left the room in tears and the teacher sent them to the office. Courtney explained the letter to Dr. Rice and Paige confirmed the note's contents. Steven was called to the office, as were his and Paige's parents. DHR was also called.

"I just can't believe it," Christie Seavers said.

"I know. It's so sick. It's bad enough that she's retarded. But she's also his cousin," said Kim Waters.

"I hope he gets expelled," Trish Jenkins said.

"I don't think they can expel you for something that happened off-campus. I heard Courtney talking to Brianna in the hall. She said Steven was crying. He feels really bad," Christie said, dipping her pizza in ranch.

He actually hadn't had sex with her, as he'd told me one day after I asked if he'd ever had any other sexual encounters. It happened about two years ago, before Steven and I had started our sessions. He'd fondled her and got her to touch him. That was about it. He said he regretted it, that he thought about it everyday and it just made him sick inside. I believed him and promised I wouldn't tell anyone.

"Well I hope he gets expelled," Trish said.

I went through the rest of the day. I didn't speak in English though I'd done my reading. I didn't volunteer in Math though I'd done my homework for the next two weeks. During detention I wrote out my next script. I decided Daniel could be my official sidekick, and was funny enough to handle his own segments. We needed to break out of the boy band stigma so I thought we'd do a tribute episode to Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Mandy Moore. 5:30 finally came and Senora Sitwell dismissed us. I went behind the library to wait on Daniel. I'd sat there for about five minutes before deciding I'd just go wait for him at the gym. I rose and heard an angry scream: "Hey, faggot!"

The first punch knocked my glasses off my face. Steven punched me in the stomach and stomped on the glasses. I looked down to see them, crushed. "I'm gonna have to transfer. My whole family hates me. I might even go to juvie. You happy, cocksucker?" he screamed, punching me again in the stomach.

"No! Fuck you!" I shoved him and he nearly lost his balance. "You shouldn't have fucked your retarded cousin, pervert!"

He swung at me and missed. "She's not even that retarded. What the fuck? Why would you do that? 'Cause I wouldn't let you suck my dick anymore?" I looked around to see if anyone had heard, and I was scared because I realized he no longer cared. Where the fuck was Daniel?

He punched my face, busting my nose and taking me to the ground. My blood went all over both our shirts. I leapt up and pummeled him to the ground. I ripped at his shirt, tearing the collar. I punched him as hard as I could. He easily overpowered me,

flipping me over and pummeling my face over and over. "That feel good, faggot?" he laughed. He thrust his knee into my groin. He grabbed my head and forced it deep into the asphalt until I tasted dirt and rocks and cement and started to gag.

He looked down at me, the same look on his face as when I'd blow him—both tender and anguished, angry at himself or me, I could never tell. His body pinned mine to the ground. Like always, he was in complete control. He kept looking at me. I could see the tears forming, the tears, and, was that an erection I felt pressing into me? He whispered something—"Sorry?" He spit in my face. The tears never came. I heard a car door slam.

Daniel got Steven by the shirt and pulled him up. He pushed him back on the ground. "What the fuck?" he yelled, looking at my bloody face. "Are you okay?" I nodded yes.

Daniel punched Steven in the ribs, in the face. "You're a fucking faggot!" Steven yelled, looking at me, not caring that he was getting his ass kicked. Daniel punched his mouth, busting his lip. I slowly got up off the ground, sore. Daniel was still hitting Steven. "What the fuck?" he said again. I motioned for him to get off. Steven was lying there in a semi-fetal position. He called me "faggot" again. I kicked him in the stomach. He couldn't breath, I could tell. I kicked him in the stomach. Daniel pulled on my shoulder, a pleading look on his face.

"Call me 'faggot' again!" I screamed. He complied with my request. I kicked him in the balls. We left.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Daniel asked as I put on my seat belt. He handed me a jersey so I could wipe my face. I looked back at Steven, still lying there. A teacher had come to his rescue. He pushed her off and limped towards home.

"He's sick. He fucked his retarded cousin."

"So you decided to start a fight with him?" Daniel cranked his truck. "Mom's gonna flip her shit."

"Well, he started it." I looked at the blood on the jersey and then to Daniel. "Did you ever hear anything when Steven would sleep over?"

"I heard him snore."

"I mean, like anything, you know, out of the ordinary?"

"I'm a heavy sleeper. Is there something you want to tell me? Like the real reason for the fight?"

"I think you know. Is it okay if I don't say it?"

He pulled out onto the street and looked over to me, his hair loosely coming down over his eyes. "I don't care. Whatever you want, okay? You're my brother."

It hurt when I smiled.

Lindsay Hodgens

All's Well in the New Year

On some nights the darkness itself seems to open into two great slits—eyes like black holes, sucking everyone into the void along with it. That was the mood on December 31 at the Rat-a-tat Club on 45th. A lousier night had not been seen. Each table was full, some even overburdened to the point of flowing into other tables. The mood was light jazz with a dash of highbrow ennui. The lights? Low except for little colored orb lights that were stationed at the center of every table, casting a faint glow on the faces that gathered around it. Noise was at a minimum, the guests talking contentedly amongst themselves as a clean-cut man with a handsome face whittled away at his saxophone onstage. Every now and then there would be a sharp shout as some waiter, who had no little orb to guide him, inevitably clashed with someone's chair or tripped over someone's purse.

"Oh Rick," one woman swooned, smashing her breasts against the edge of the table. She looked into the face of the man across from her. They were a party of two, keeping an entire table to themselves in the midst of the crowded club. Puffing on an elegant cigarette, she hungrily took in the familiar cheekbones—cut like diamonds—and the skin that covered them. He had smooth, poreless skin tinged with a hint of bronze. Those were his best features, she knew, and she liked to throw out the rest of his face and pretend that his beauty was uniform.

"Yes, dear?" he said as his eyes trailed after the waitress that had just hurried by.

"I'm so glad you brought me here tonight. All the girls back home have been raving about this place," she continued, trailing her cigarette around like a Fourth of July sparkler, as if it gave her an element of charm. Smoke mixed and mingled in front of her face, rendering it in frightening proportions. The man looked at

this, withholding his thoughts and simply scrutinizing the thin-lipped face that stared at him through billows of smoke. She dashed her cigarette out on the table and stood up.

"I'm going to the little ladies' room," she said, batting her eyelashes. Rick nodded, his arms crossed over his chest, and made no comment. She picked up a small, boxy purse from beside her chair and left off, swishing her hips from side to side as she walked. Rick sighed and reached into his pocket, pulling out a pack of cigarettes of his own. Sliding a rough thumbnail under the carton's lid and snatching out a stout cigarette, he swiftly had the thing lit and dangling between his lips. The chatter of the club was still amiss, but the stillness created by his date's absence was enough to afford him a moment's rest. He took advantage of this, savoring each breathful of cigarette smoke.

A man in a stiff-necked white button-up stopped by the table, leaning close to Rick's face. But before he could speak, a shake of the head told him that nothing was needed. This presence, too, disappeared. Removing the dwindling cigarette from his mouth, Rick leaned back in his chair, bringing it onto its back legs alone. He blew the last of the smoke out of his mouth and dashed out his cigarette as well. He left it, trailing S.O.S. signals from the middle of the table. He could faintly see a woman's shape emerge from the restroom area, a jaunty figure bound tightly by corsets. He could tell by the rushing, swaying walk that it was Christine. He sighed and wished that he had not put out his cigarette. At least it would have given him a reason not to talk to her. She was the fifth girl his mother had set him up with since last month, and with each subsequent date Rick was losing faith in his mother's judgment. The first couple of girls hadn't been too bad. They were both blonde and very pretty, and all they had going against them was a couple of wrong opinions about politics. He had taken them to nice restaurants, dressed up in the finest suit he owned, and they had taken just about every dollar in his pocket. He had gone home after that second date and demanded that his mother at least find some girls that weren't as high maintenance. What resulted were dates with girls like Christine.

"I'm back, honey," she giggled as she threw the chair back from the table. It crashed into a table behind them, knocking over a couple of glasses that spilled their dark blood onto the table.

"Hey, watch it!" a man shouted through the darkness and haze.

She giggled again and pursed her painted lips into a heart. "I'm terribly sorry, sir. I just didn't see you there," she said and sat down just like nothing had happened. Rick tilted the brim of his hat down, shading his eyes just enough to get a moment's respite. That was the kind of girl his mother set him up with—giggling, slim-waisted divas who accepted no responsibility for what they did. Spoiled girls, all of them.

"Honey, you okay?" her voice came again, and Rick knew that his time alone was up. He swiftly raised the front of his hat, pushing it back again to cover the small balding circle on the back of his head, and said, "Of course, dear. I just don't much like this band, that's all." Her mouth made a perfectly rehearsed 'O' and she summed this up with a wink of an eye and a shimmy of her shoulders. Rick realized that he hadn't even been paying attention to the band, and gave his attention to this way out. The man with the saxophone was just bowing and tugging at his tie.

"That would be Harold Gilchrist, everybody," the emcee spoke into the microphone. "Next up we're gonna see an act new here at the Rat a Tat Club. I found this young'un out on the street just the other night and I said to him, 'Kid, I think you might have somethin' there.' I present your last act before the new year!"

The barely attentive audience gave loud applause in response to the emcee's booming tenor voice and prepared to sink back into the comfort of their private conversations. A young, thin boy was brought onstage. He was dressed in a shabby pinstriped suit, a dangling thing whose cuffs extended far past the ends of his fingertips. The pants were rolled up loosely into cuffs, underneath which were a shabby pair of shoes that didn't match. He had in his hand a long, thin case. The emcee's voice had boomed for a couple of seconds, but when it died down there was nothing to fill the void except for a faint clicking sound. The sound in the club muted until every head was turned to the stage. The kid was on his knees, kneeling reverently in front of the now-open case. Metal scraped metal and before long he was on his feet again, this time with an old trombone in hand.

There was a moment of awkward silence when the audience wondered what exactly to do. They finally caught on and

supplied the boy with another round of tentative applause. Rick reached out, grabbing his glass, to take a drink, but found that the glass was empty. He looked around and prepared to summon a waiter, but stopped when he noticed that the club was dead silent again. The boy had sat down in a chair and was applying a clear liquid to the slide of his trombone. It was a picture that was normal enough—the club was a frequent hotspot for jazz, and a renowned trombonist had visited just the other day. Rick wondered what the audience was fixated on. Then he saw the boy's eyes. The boy was gliding his slide back and forth, feeling an unseen snag and going to treat it again. He was staring at his instrument and his eyes were dark. They were squinted tightly as if this would zoom his vision in to microscopic levels. They were sunken deeply into his face, giving him the look of having smudged black eyeliner all around his eyes. He finished tuning up his instrument and leaned over to pull something out of his case. The audience stopped jittering for a moment, refilling the club with the usual hushed conversation. Rick kept his eyes on the stage. From his case the kid pulled out a piece of rope. He took this to the slide and tied it around the handle in a thick knot. Another was tied at the other end of the string, and this is what the boy grasped.

The audience was taken aback by the sudden outburst of sound. It was something savage—the deep-throated cry of an animal. Underneath the noise Rick could hear gasps. Everyone was afflicted by the same response. The boy was slinging the rope with all of his might, his arms still not being long enough for an instrument that was meant for an adult. He was blowing with all of his might, his cheeks puffing out like he was trying to blow hot air onto his hands to keep himself warm. And the notes fell as such—like the banging on cardboard boxes to make sure someone's not in it before you take it for yourself, like the guttural screech of the dumpster lid as the young urchin prepares to devour scraps. And through all of this, Rick kept going back to the boy's eyes. They weren't just sunken in by code of DNA, they were the badge of the rough life. They were the eyes that one gets after being walloped a couple of times by your father late one night when he's drunk. They were hungry, and the boy was whizzing the slide up and down that trombone like it was going to fill his belly any faster.

Things continued in this fashion for minutes. The place

where everyone went to drown their sorrows was tense, poised on the edge of a trigger. Rick was sure that all Hell was about to break loose, but as each second went by nobody moved. They looked horrified, sure, but this was something they couldn't pretend didn't exist. It was right there in the secondhand soot-stained instrument being played by soot-stained hands that belonged to a soot-stained human being. His entire reality was soot—groveling for the scraps of humanity. Rick laughed in spite of himself, drawing a few angry glares from the people sitting around him. His mother had never liked his lack of ambition; no, she did everything she could to give him the urge to rise to the top, but Rick couldn't help but smile as he watched woman after woman run to the restroom. Well, of course they didn't run. Not in the conventional sense. They made haste, as he was sure their mothers taught them to.

Rick's train of thought was broken by the unexpected sound of silence. He looked up and the kid was still sitting there, his eyes still burning black like the demon couldn't be silenced. Maybe it couldn't. Maybe it never would be. He sat there like that for about fifteen seconds before jumping up from his seat. He did a quick, unrehearsed bow as the emcee made his way onstage. He was smiling as wide as the television had taught him to.

"Wasn't that something, folks?" he said, and the audience realized that they hadn't clapped. The round of applause was short-lived, not like the roaring audience that was usually there, but it was something. It was polite.

"Rick," a voice drifted across the table, making Rick jump in his seat. He had forgotten that his date was even there. Christine's beauty had vanished, leaving behind the face of a scared girl, and as Rick looked around he didn't see a single face in the club that didn't have that same expression. "I don't think I really liked that band," she said, throwing her best pout into her voice, making it sound sultry and young. "I really liked that other guy much better. Wasn't he swell? What was the name of that song he—"

"Christine," Rick said, still looking out into the rest of the dark club.

"Yes, Rick?" Christine asked.

"For the love of God, would you just shut up?" he said. He could hear the gasp that followed very clearly. He kept looking straight ahead, after all of the huffing and puffing, and the pulling

out and pushing in of chairs. She stormed past him, throwing her hips desperately with every step, but he remained resolute.

"Well everybody," the emcee boomed, "it looks like we've come to the very last seconds before the new year!" The boy was still standing onstage, and Rick had the feeling that while he was there the club would never become alive again. He smiled, hailing the waiter and taking a glass of champagne off of the tray he carried. No other glass had been touched, or would be. Rick watched the man go from table to table, trying to snap the people out of their seeming coma. No one paid him any attention. They were frozen, wearing their masks of horror, staring. What they were staring into God only knows, but Rick had a pretty good idea. "Alright," the emcee said, his voice unwavering in energy even as it was unrequited. "Ten, nine, eight, seven—" A few people joined in halfheartedly, but most of the club was still silent. "—six, five, four, three, two, one!" Rick brought his hand steadily around the stem of his glass. "Happy New Year, everybody!" the emcee roared, and a few people clapped, but Rick alone raised his glass.

"Happy New Year!" he called, and he meant it. Then he drank. He drank to the partygoers, the social elite, still sitting catatonic around him. He drank to himself, to his future, whatever it may be. And he drank to the boy, who was still standing onstage, the haunt that would follow most of the club's audience for the rest of their lives. Rick paid what was due, put on his jacket, and left the club. He started off towards home, traveling underneath the blanket of cold neon lights, past alleyways full of children with the same face.

Anthony Vacca

Constellations

In the mornings, Damo likes to tell me his dreams. He likes to prop his chin on my belly and peer up past the curve of my chin and shoulder. Behind me is the wicker headboard with all these tiny crosses patched together. The wall shines through a sickly yellow between the crocheted spaces. I guess this is what he stares at.

I wanted to paint over the bedroom—the living room of our apartment I painted a deep crimson—but Damo says, No new coats.

Damo likes for stability in the bedroom. I can think of words like predictability and routine but I have never heard Damo say these himself.

What he likes to do is sleep with his knees tucked into the back of my thighs and his face buried into my armpit. He breathes shallowly when he sleeps because he smokes too much. Sometimes I wake in the night to the sound of it but I can always fall back asleep.

I think the walls look like they are stained with piss.

It's almost a blessing that Damo likes for the lights to be off in the bedroom when he comes home. Even if he's in the living room, Damo doesn't want to glance over and see the overhead light on or the lamp I keep atop the dresser so I can read at nights while waiting for him to come home. But nothing can be done about mornings when the sun peeks in from under the cheap plastic blinds and the walls shine a mellow hue. Damo too, is lit up to by the long bands of light as he tells me his dreams. I like to peer down at his shaggy hair that hangs past his ears and see that, although dark, it is not black. His hair is really the deepest shade of brown I have ever seen; they match his eyes.

I don't like the morning light—I am never ready for it. I would close my eyes but I know Damo would get scared that I am not listening. He wouldn't get angry because Damo never gets angry. He would simply be scared.

Damo lives through much fear in his sleep. Come morning, I am his therapist and priest. I help stem the fear; it's my finger plugging at the cracks of the dam, and there's a pattern to the cracks.

When Damo talks, he likes to trace a finger along the the

tattoos inked into the flesh beneath my left breast. There lies a trail of black stars, each the size of a quarter, that curves down along my ribcage and then around to the small of my back. This is where the stars come to a halt at a notch in my spine.

This is an unfinished work, another one of those projects I have taken up to keep myself occupied while waiting for Damo. I try and figure sometimes if I am waiting for him to come or not come home. I guess I can't be sure until both are experienced; I don't pretend to know things I can't.

I guess it's just Damo teasing when he says, All that ink hides your freckles.

I tell him I have plenty more to go around.

He says, Yeah? Maybe I don't want to lose anymore.

But this is not what Damo is saying now because Damo is talking about his dreams, and I am listening.

Damo says, "It wasn't even the guy I shot. Hell, not even the same place. It happened on the sidewalk outside that store sells all the fat clothes for pregnant ladies. But now it's like we're at the carnival or fair or something. I don't know, I never been to any fair. Only seen them in movies, you know? But it definitely wasn't the same guy 'cause I can hardly remember that guy's face. He was fat, I remember that. And I think he was wearing a wig 'cause it was windy out and he had one hand pinned down to the top of his head. Looked like he was trying to keep something from flying away. I can't say for certain though on account he went down just like that. I shot him and it's like his arm was stuck. Face-down on the sidewalk with a hand on his head like he was a cartoon character about to tip me his hat. I don't know. He definitely was fat, and he had glasses, but I don't know."

I guess I am thinking about whether Damo is going to fuck me or not this morning. I have been having the cramps bad this week—worse than they have been in months—but I know it wouldn't bother Damo. The blood doesn't deter him; probably a symptom of his trade.

Most nights, Damo likes to fuck but mornings are another matter. Usually Damo likes to keep the morning chaste. He wants to cuddle and drink coffee and watch reruns of Happy Days or Leave it to Beaver. I don't think this really requires much analysis, sort of explains itself.

But sometimes after one of these dream telling sessions, he wants to fuck and it's always a vicious, cathartic fuck. They can leave me sore for the rest of the day. I am not really looking forward to that much pain between my legs.

Don't get me wrong, I like fucking Damo because when I feel him come, it's a certainty that he's there inside me.

Any night, Damo may come home bleeding out of some new hole that has been drilled into his body. He will come to me bleeding out into his hands. He will need me to mend him.

That's the kind of animal the waiting can be but it's usually less dramatic than that.

Sometimes he comes home with a gift. It's always something black with diamonds burrowed in. He likes for me to try on whatever it is right away. If he feels it looks particularly good on me, we'll go out to a restaurant for dinner and then to bars until late in the night.

I like to think that when people look at us they see a happy couple. I am sure we make an odd pair—me all in black with my piercings and Damo dressed like some Japanese gangster with his baby blue jacket and dress pants. Solid white dress shirt. No tie. Damo makes good money doing what he does for a living so the restaurants are always nice ones. The kind of people in places like that are bound to stare because we make no attempt to hide who we are. I just hope something shines through; you're always hearing about glows and whatnot on the television and in those magazines in the waiting rooms of clinics.

Do we glow? Do we produce the wattage for a thing like that?

Most nights, Damo just comes home and fucks me. We eat, fuck, and then sleep. Sometimes I will wake in the night to him fucking me. He always goes back to sleep afterward but I don't really mind; I can always fall back asleep too.

This one time, Damo says to me, If you were a man I would still fuck you. I would be gay for you.

I asked him what if he was a woman.

Damo, all serious, says, I ain't never going to be a fucking woman.

But this isn't what Damo is saying now.

What Damo is saying is, "It was this lady I saw outside this

Jew deli I like to grab lunch at sometimes. I mean, She wasn't doing anything special and I figure this is a dream and you always see in the movie that there is some Freudian or prophetic connection with the dreams and when your like awake, but why this lady? She wasn't pretty or anything. She just looked like somebody's mother, had her her hair done back in one of those buns, starting to go to gray. I figure it should at least be the guy's wife, you know? Her being the one who put down the money and all but it ain't. So I don't think the dream's got to do with guilt. No. I wouldn't say it was about that, but this lady is the one I shot. She's like pushing this cart down the thoroughfare, selling hotdogs or balloons or some shit like that, I can't really remember now. The way dreams slip away? It's like that sensation when you realize there's a spider crawling on your arm. You can feel it in your hairs like they were antennas. They say we're evolved from insects some point back down the road, give or take a few billion years. Is that what hair is? The evolution of antennas? I still shoot her all the same. Except she don't go down face-forward like the guy. She goes down backwards, takes the cart over with her and, yeah, now I remember. The cart spills over and it's full of fucking shoes. This lady is selling shoes at the fucking carnival? At the time it seems natural enough, you know, because it wasn't one of those dreams where you know you're dreaming, but fucking shoes? So I sit down right there on the wood and all these other people are still walking by, none of them even flinched when I shot the woman. I don't ever look at her again 'cause I know she's dead and I think she just kind of disappeared. Hell, I'm pretty sure the whole fucking fair and all the people vanished too. It's just me and this cart and all those shoes. So I start putting on the shoes 'cause I just realized I am bare foot and it's cold out. But none of the shoes fit. Not a one of them, no matter how many I try on and I don't know, I guess I woke up about then."

Damo eyes shift over to my face like ice melting across a hot skillet. His breath is hot on my stomach. I am aware of the fact that I am petting the back of his neck, twisting long strands of his hair around my index finger. He breathes steadily through his nostrils because his lips are pressed firmly together.

I don't say anything but that's okay, Damo doesn't want offerings from me. He fears his dreams, he has no desire for me to help him understand them. He just wants to expecl them onto

me because the simple fact of the matter is that I am Damo's dreamcatcher.

Damo says, "I think I should get dressed now, you know, get this day started?"

He pulls himself up with either arm until he is hovering above my face, his hands pressed to either side of me; in yoga we call this the flank position. Yoga is another hobby I have taken up to fill in those spaces of waiting. I just don't have the heart for a job anymore. It just makes me feel like I am going through the motions, playacting at being a person. Damo makes more than enough money to supply us with what we need.

Damo is breathing through his mouth now. I can feel his breath fogging up the metal stud along my eyebrow.

"My pants. Those are the first thing I like to put on in the morning."

So by the time Damo finishes fucking me, I am on my stomach and he is straddling my back, and sure it hurts at first but after a while it does feel good. I can have that at least.

Damo finishes with a grunt that stretches out into a mewl and he slides off my back like a cowboy out of a saddle. He topples next to me, sinking into the mattress tangled with black sheets, and starts nibbling at the ring pierced through the corner of my lip. I lick at his teeth and we kind of kiss and cuddle like this for a while.

After he's gone—his blue dress coat and pants rumpled but still in a way that looks good on him—I don't feel like getting dressed. Something about watching Damo crawl out of bed to the bathroom with his limp dick dripping blood has made me sad. Maybe it's the fact that I will have to clean the sheets and possibly scrub the mattress. I haven't brought myself to look yet.

I thought about keeping a journal for Damo's dreams, write them all down after he leaves each day but I know that this would only disturb him if he ever found it. Damo treats his dreams like sins. After confession, sins are to be forgiven. Sins are to be forgotten.

Damo would ask me something like, Why don't you write about your own dreams?

And would I admit I don't dream anymore? Sleeping is just another way I fill spaces of time now, I guess. But I remember every dream Damo has let loose in me; there's a pattern to the cracks, you can trace them clinging to my over-taut tendons. I am aware

that my organs must be a sticky meshing of wires, a spider's web.

Later, I know I will stand before the mirror. I will still be naked because there is no need for clothes when I will be spending all this time alone. Sometimes I wonder if I should just lay in bed with my legs spread open but I think Damo might cry if he found me this way. He likes to come home to me dressed with my eye shadow stenciled in right and my lipstick neat. He likes my hair to smell like peaches and for it to hang straight down past my shoulders. I think he likes the idea of me waiting but there is a threshold that can be crossed. There is always a threshold.

Yes, I will stand in front of the mirror, my back to the pane, and I will study the reflection. I will trace the path of stars with my own fingertips. I want to add another star but I know first that I will have to decide on a direction. I have a whole body to map.

Ethan Taylor

Dead Cigarette-Fish

From behind a cloud of smoke and through muttered profanities, Charles Benton posed a question to his fishbowl.

"What's the word?" he asked it irritably. "I can't think of the goddamn word."

Another cloud of smoke.

Professor Benton had been up all night, drinking and grading papers from his Advanced Literary Theory class—page after page of words about words. Collectively, his students had written 337,246 words. Now, his head heavy as the alcohol in his blood faded with the night, he failed to think of just one. He imagined his brain as a bathtub—full of watery words and liquid phrases—with the plug pulled. A river of syllables was sucked down and out through his pen, but this one word continued to circle the drain. He could picture it spinning, spiraling, and finally the word slipped through his consciousness and out over his tongue.

"Meticulously!" he declared to his fishbowl. With the word now loose in his small apartment, Charles was able to catch it and tack it to the page with his pen. "It is clear that your research was meticulously rendered," he said aloud as he wrote on his student's paper. By now his cigarette had nearly an inch of ash suspended at its tip, and he tapped it lightly into the fishbowl as though he were feeding the small, exotic creatures that so recently swam there. Now only the belly-up bodies of cigarette butts floated in the water, bleeding into it a sickly yellow color as though they were severed limbs. Charles took a final drag before adding a new corpse to the collection. He lit another and began to read the next paper, occasionally flicking a morsel of charred tobacco into the sea of dead cigarettes.

Three days prior, Charles had sat in the diner he frequented when a coughing fit seized him and brought up a quarter-sized gob of black phlegm that appeared to be speckled with blood. He stared at it, horrified, and left his napkin open on the table to display the diseased amoeba while he finished his meal. I should stop smoking, he thought, for real this time.

He drove to the MegaDepot supermarket the next day after work and bought three boxes of nicotine patches, two boxes of nicotine gum (one mint flavored, the other mocha cappuccino), one fishbowl, a container of fish food and five small, neon fish. He hoped that they would help distract him from cravings. He chose the most brightly colored ones because he thought they would be conspicuous enough for him to notice and remember to feed. This time, he told himself, I'm really going to do it. Then another coughing fit doubled him over in the aisle on his way to the checkout terminal.

When Charles arrived back at his apartment, he put the fish in their new home and tapped some food into the water. Then, almost frantically, he tore open the box of nicotine patches and slapped one onto his chest. He opened the nicotine gum and began to chew two pieces of the mocha flavor. It was too late in the evening on a weeknight to drink coffee, so he hoped the gum would suppress two cravings at once. He sat down at his desk and began to read the material he had assigned for his 8 o'clock class the following morning.

About twenty minutes later, Charles realized that he felt dizzy. The place on his chest where he had put the nicotine patch felt hot and itchy. His stomach began to turn. Head swimming, he jumped up,

unbuttoned his shirt and tore off the nicotine patch, leaving a red mark and some adhesive behind. At that moment, Charles realized he couldn't breathe. In his alarm he had swallowed his gum and was now choking. He leaned forward so his stomach was over the back of his desk chair and dropped his weight on it. He coughed the gum out, which hit his computer screen and stuck there. Charles thought he was going to vomit as his vision narrowed and blurred. He stumbled toward the bathroom, bracing himself against the hallway walls. He made it in time to disgorge his supper from the diner into the sink and then hit his head on the toilet bowl as his legs collapsed underneath him in a blackout.

When Charles came to, his first thought after wondering why his head hurt so goddamn much was, Jesus, I need some fresh air. And a cigarette.

In the light of the streetlamp outside of his apartment building, Charles tried to recall the events leading up to his waking up on the bathroom floor. He remembered being in the supermarket, buying—What the fuck was I buying? His memory of the fluorescent lights of the supermarket faded to black and resumed on the floor of his bathroom with the taste of stomach acid in his mouth. Charles flicked the glowing butt of his cigarette into the street and decided to go to bed. It was almost midnight and he had to get up early.

Inside his apartment, Charles cleaned the vomit out of the sink, not remembering how it got there, and brushed his teeth. He fed the fish on his desk, simultaneously thinking this was something he did every evening and that he had never done it before. A thought sparked in his mind: These fish are important. They're here for a reason. But the synapse misfired and the spark never made it across the cleft. He lay in bed and fell into a restless, intermittent sleep.

Even the tendrils of smoke from Charles' cigarette were thick and sluggish at dawn the next day. The coffee smelled bland as it brewed on the counter, and Charles' thoughts were unfocused and incomplete. His mouth was filled with a metallic taste and his head ached dully. He noticed that his five fish all floated upside down at the surface of their bowl. They looked bloated. Well, shit, Charles thought as he flushed them, one by one, down the toilet. It's not like I had the damn things for any real reason anyway.

A spark.

Or did I?

Another misfire.

Charles filled the fishbowl with clean water without thinking and set it, vacant, on his desk. He managed to go through the rest of his weekday morning routine and arrive on time to a half-full classroom of students whose bleary eyes and slouching postures reminded him of his own state that morning.

"Obviously," Charles announced loudly enough to make the students in the first two rows jump, "the few of you want to be here as little as I do!" A few patronizing chuckles rippled toward the back of the room. "That's just fine," he continued, "maybe it'll keep us all on the same page, figuratively speaking.

"I did not finish grading your papers, but considering what I saw of them, that's to your benefit. I will advise a number of you to submit revisions, but that means you will need to get it right the first time on the final, which I will discuss briefly towards the end of class. For now, let's continue our discussion of Roland Barthes. What do you all think Barthes meant when he said, 'Language is a skin' and 'my language trembles with desire'?"

Four hands rose and Charles singled out the pretty girl with red hair in the third row.

"I think he means that, like, language covers us, you know? And like, it also gives us our identities. I mean, I don't know how a language could 'tremble with desire,' but I think he's trying to say that his language is sort of a person or body too."

Charles nodded. "That's a good try, but I think what he really means is—hrrrmph!" Suddenly Charles heard a head-splitting ring and his eyes began to water. He looked at the redhead and knew from his other students' faces that he was alone in this experience. He cringed and a couple students murmured concern, but all Charles could hear was that all-encompassing ring, like the buzz of a mosquito amplified to earth-shaking decibels. The last thought he had before losing consciousness was, God, I hope I don't puke this time.

Charles awoke to see his colleague, Greta Ortega, adjunct instructor of Freshman Spanish, leaning over him and looking worried. "Oh, he's awake!" she exclaimed to the empty classroom when Charles opened his eyes. "Doctor Benton, are you okay?"

"Yes, I think so," Charles responded, realizing the left side of his face felt swollen. "Where is the redhead?"

"Who?"

"Erm, my students? Where did they go?"
"They left," Greta stated flatly. "I heard a whump when I was walking down the hall to my office, and then one of your students told me you had just passed out and that she wanted to call 911. I told her I would take care of it and that they should all leave. I thought you would not want them to see you like this. Should I call the hospital?"
"No, I'm fine, really," Charles protested as he sat up carefully and began to massage his jaw where it had hit the wooden floor of the classroom. "But I think I should go home. If my students get to have an early start on the weekend, so should I."
Outside of the building, Charles looked around, puzzled and wondering if it had been the redhead that had wanted to call 911. He wanted to believe that at least one of his students cared that much about him. He preferred to think the redhead cared most of all.
When Charles realized that his car was not where he thought it was, his vague fantasies about his student faded to confusion.
Where the hell did I park? He lit a cigarette and began to walk in a random direction, hoping he did not look as lost as he felt. At length, he spotted the wood-paneled side of his Buick station wagon.
From the university, Charles Benton drove his '95 Roadmaster to the liquor store to spend thirty dollars on cheap spirits for the third time in as many weeks. This was becoming a Friday routine. The woman behind the counter recognized him.
"How you doin', sug'?" she asked. Her eyes widened when she saw Charles' face. "You get into a fight or something? You don't look so great."
"I fell," Charles responded. Then, to avoid further explanation, he changed the subject. "Every time I've been here in the last month, so have you," Benton said. "You should take a day off so I feel less like an alcoholic."
"And you should eat a biscuit so you don't look so damn skinny," the clerk retorted. The exchange made Charles smile. Then he cringed; his face hurt.
Well, there's a diner down the street. They have fresh coffee and you can smoke inside, Charles considered saying. He dismissed the thought, telling himself, That's the classiest place I can think of? I'd be better off asking when my face doesn't feel like ground meat anyway. I'll ask next week. Then he added, for real this time.
Spark...

Misfire.

"You okay, sug'? You look like you lost it for a minute," the clerk said, snapping Charles out of his thoughts.

"Yeah, fine," Charles said, disoriented.

"It'll be $32.74," she told him in a tone that suggested it wasn't the first time.

Charles paid her, left the store and drove to his apartment, composing a script for asking the clerk out the following week.

The clerk.

The clerk? Fuck!

Charles groaned aloud as he realized he didn't even know the woman's name.

Doesn't she wear a nametag? Shit, I can't remember.

Charles arrived at his apartment, swearing to himself under his breath in a daze of self-loathing. He decided to start grading the stack of week-old student papers on his desk and not think of his cowardly blunder. As he poured whiskey over ice cubes, he glanced across the room and saw the fishbowl, full of water but devoid of fish, on his desk. He couldn't remember how it got there.

Spark.

Misfire.

He returned to his task, filling the glass with generic cola and drinking half of it in one gulp. He topped off his glass with another shot of whiskey and sat down to get started on those papers. He put his feet on the desk, holding a pen in one hand and a student's paper in the other. As he read, the words on the page began to blur. The ringing sound began again, though not as intensely as it had a few hours earlier, and his face began to sweat. He put down the paper, dropped the pen and closed his eyes. The ringing stopped. He resumed his reading and finished his drink. When he began to feel the effects of two shots of whiskey in his bloodstream, he made another drink and lit a cigarette.

I guess it's a good thing I don't have anywhere to go tonight, he thought.

Just another Friday night.

He sighed, sat down again and continued to read, absently ashing into the fishbowl as he did so—as though he had always done so.

No spark.

No misfire.

Travis Swinford

Efficiency of Servitude

In the glass, the seats were filled. Warm grease keeps the air still, and plates clap together, braking any ordering concentration. Words sit on vinyl, eyes see explosive heartbeats. The menu is a slick treat for anyone that didn't mind the occasional indulgence; for others, a diet. The patrons come to have their fill;

- The coffee: introduction
- Mounted plates: zenith

While fulfilling their god, in its active peak, they look for the end. Forks employ all colors as the eggs run off the plates to break the tape that says, "finished."

Tired hands see no food in their destination. Grits and cheese were no fix for the cook, who has three more orders of hash-browns after the omelette is finished. The waitresses did not come here to eat, their freedoms are not specified in sweet or unsweet, with our without toast. The plates of food mean very little to them, they know it is not the end, and that it was error not failure when mistakes meet between the order, cook and mouth. The customer expects the best with their eyes set on cornered perfection. They receive the food as-is while being well-versed on what they deserve.

When a family enters the diner, thirsty and eager for servitude, chains lock around their necks, expectations are held above a small portal. The units gather importance from each other. The waitress doesn't give a shit about their child. Nevertheless, he's a growing boy who deserves more than a stalled order of Cherry Coke.

Each time a family, entitled to "satisfied", stands to leave, finished and finite, before their end is ever reached, they've gained their next mission. Five systems with similar functions: younger/older, male/female, discipline/d; a baby slumps in a booster seat dragged from the window, older extensions were born to sit where they sat this morning: in special rooms where teachers plan funeral arrangements.

Waiting for their turn and goal, patrons line the wall, watching others indulge, wipe, smack and stir. To watch with a partial eye– the teats will be there for whoever may be next. Babies

won't go hungry here; their duty is to become big and strong. It is not their process, it is their destiny; the customers deserve so. In the line against the wall lean more children–extensions and aspirations. Their history shoveled and forgotten remains void in their brown eyes and dim short sleeves. For a booth that would stage their love for unitary values, eyes wait–awaiting a beast, half a man to me, facing no one, joined by only pedigree. His business was premier, his meaning unparalleled to units ripped by lateral discourse. No holds would be placed on the path to comfort; only then do possible worlds funnel into dozy, solitary desire.

What prince sits upon such a sleek throne?
What back should be wiped down for royal endeavors?
What composition shall the choir cry?

Surely whatever diversion to be conceptualized will be built upon a limitless frame. Complexions are knitted into thicket from a blurry fringe. Efficiency lays low to the fringe purfle, its dark passage towards a dusty door. After the last bite of biscuit, the door is opened. As a humble servant delivers the trade to darlin', our hero is pushed through the frame, back to the fringe. The efforts are simple; the path is patched. The kitchen is too close to me now and the grease keeps windows from frosting. There is a trail relevant to popular desire, but the path leads to mud. You can pay your check and lay in the cool.

———

Hannah Conner

The Goldfish

Wanting to teach his children something about life and responsibility, Louis decided it was time for a goldfish or two. He went to the pet store, expecting a simple In-With-a-Dollar-Out-With-a-Goldfish procedure but when he got there he found it more difficult than he had planned. Because he knew that he only needed a bowl and a goldfish, he felt harassed by the twenty-something sales clerk who was uncharmingly witty in her ill-fitting uniform. He did her the favor of reminding her that fish did not grow larger than their environments allowed. She said that the same fact applied to children. Seeing that he didn't understand, she explained, "Put a baby in a box, and it will stop growing too. Then it dies." She hadn't stopped cleaning the aquariums since their conversation began. The towel squeaked against the surface of the glass. Louis said he was willing to take the chance, assuring her that as a boy he had had a goldfish that lived in a bowl for three years. "Sir," she looked at him sorrowfully. "The average lifespan of a wild goldfish is thirty years." She stopped wiping the glass to tell him this and informed him that if he now bought a goldfish with this knowledge, he would practically be a goldfish murderer. But Louis wasn't listening; he was thinking, "Wild goldfishes?"

Kacee Ross

Hollow, Goodbye

We were in a house that I lived in, a house that you loved, and you knew you were going to die. So we orchestrated the last night of your life, and you knew I was the one to ask. This was a genuine and tangible idea. This was you, and I was honored to be with you that night. It was your life that we enjoyed, and I couldn't break my gaze from you.

My house was a small hole in the earth, subservient to trees and weeds. It felt like a hollow, like a grave, and we called it the hollow. A heaven of pine trees wrapped around the hollow; creatures crept in the weeds. It was dark where I lived. The only light that existed was from the moon, and on that night, the luminesce of your eyes. So it was my home where you drained your last breaths, the hollow of your spirit, in the hollow of my home.

That night your hands didn't fumble, and you said things that defied your coarseness. Wiry smiles spread your face, showed the night your teeth, tongue, and laughter. I drank wine, you drank whiskey, and we drank each other's words. I saw the lines in your hands, and traced your lifeline with a silken feather. I took my shoes off just like you, and felt the stickers of the forest floor. Your eyes shimmered, your eyes gleamed. Your eyes burst in a supernova state. They exploded starry truth that was to be dust, that was to be darkness. And I watched with delight, suspended between you, the earth, and the night. I laughed a lot, bashful laughter, allowing myself to celebrate that night. Your eyes locked my gaze, you sucked me into the hollow air, and there we played at my home, outside ourselves and in between the pines. This forest cradled our spirits, creatures saw us as one, pine needles knit us together. We savored all moments, we thought of the present, we clanked glasses to your life. I laughed, I smiled. But then your body became frosty, and I thought I saw starlight subside. I warmed you with toasted oats from a thermal vent in my home, an offering which pleased

you. And for a moment, while my eyes were full of gratitude, watching you eat something warm from my hands, my eyelids fell upon themselves, fell with delight and comfort. I lost your gaze. So I pushed with fury to see your face again, pushed my eyelids back up with unknown ounces of love, but you were gone. The silken feather froze with time.

The stars of your face were black, your beard became frost, your mouth was a cave. Your silhouette merged with my forested home and the creatures cried a lullaby. I felt the threads of life unravel you from me, the pine needles offering sorrow. And I knew it was no more, your life washed from my smile and into my cup of wine. I drank to you.

They took your body away from the hollow, a battle I wish I fought, and they found your body to be unsightly. They said the lines in your hands were too deep. They said you had cuts all over your feet. I told them your cuts were made from shards of rare crystal. I told them your hands touched salts in the earth that are unknown to others. They'll never know why, they will never know. Now I wish to see you everywhere, but I remember you are not alive. I pray to no one for your vitality. I look towards zenith for your star. I search whiskey bottles for your smile. Goodbye.

My heart is the hollow home of our last night. The pine tree forest is the grave in which I celebrate your life. The night sky holds your eyes, the ones that pulled me out and to you. I know now the only body left of you is my own, the blood that flows through my brain to summon your memory. So in that way my wounds are healed. I know you are alive, you are in my body, you are pumped by the hollow of my home.

Alicia N. Martin

The Grey Men

I would kill to ride the subway. Everything else makes me sick. The highways, the streets, the interstate, they're all built with curves and turns, impossibly narrow lanes in architecturally congested areas and practically wide open fields outside of the city, always popping up with gravity defying hills. They're like vines twisting and spiraling - twining their way around complexes and implied factories under smoke stacks. They pile on different layers every year, different levels, and when you look down it's like seeing an infinite web of concrete, with tiny cars and tiny people trying to get out.

I did once, you know. Ride the subway.

I did many times.

The Market Street isn't so much a street as it is a catacomb. Tunnel after tunnel of white tiled wall with the red and yellow ones in the center, and little cubby holes filled with vendors all the way – though don't mistake me, there is no exact way, there isn't a direction you go in, there's just this internal map you start to get when you live here long enough. Sometimes I think it should be called World Street. There isn't one distinct nationality, so it can't even be called a "-town," like Chinatown and so on. But there is a large representation of the world, of its various cultures. There's an okinamiyaki shop next to Voo Doo Rex's Hexes, which, conveniently, is across from Priscilla's Sex Toy Shop. I had had okinamiyaki for lunch. But my point is that you can get anything there, from anywhere. And when you step out of the cubby hole, you're stepping back into the throng, into the pulsing veins of the city. The air is so thick it's a wonder we've adapted to breathing down here. It's packed. Like the subways used to be.

I had made my way into the lower half of the hive, wondering where, if there were such, the queen vendor would be, if all the shops spawned from her womb, and how much money she made; Probably a lot more than me. I sold junk antiques for a living. I really did.

I was heading for the train. Yeah, that's right, the subway. I told you, I rode it many times before. This was my last.

Through the empty gates and down the stairs and I was there, tracks on either side of me. It was chilly, and my heels seemed loud and almost obnoxious when they struck the floor, amplified, and echoed. Just me. That would have been a weird one if not for the fact that someone was spreading ill stories of people going missing on their merry way home, whispered rumors to pass the working day. At least, it all seemed like hogwash to me, to use a very old term. I read it in a book once. Cost me a savings account or two. But honestly, what creature of the depths could really snatch somebody's kiddies and tear them away into the darkness? I mean, there wasn't, there isn't, really anywhere to hide. Not in a city of thirty million people.

The Lights flickered. They made that humming noise when they were on. They'd hum for a while, then stop, then start humming again, and the light would go with it. That's all fine and dandy with me though, because there is another tunnel full of trains above this level. It happens. Those were probably empty too, but as you can see, I was a brave little girl. But to those ill-storytellers' credit, the lights flickered more than usual. I could hear trains screeching in the distance, so sorry Mr. or Mrs. Dark Creature, I thought, you're not nabbing me this time. Foiled, yet again.

Then the lights blinked again, and stayed out, only then it felt like something was powering down. Like having a city this big confront a blackout, but, unfortunately, coming from within me. I felt like a ton of bricks was crashing onto my feeble, helpless body. Someone flip

the on switch, I'm starting to freak out, crossed my mind. I began to hunch over, my hands outstretched, fingers embracing the air like claws, like a mannequin advertising the death throes. That's when I saw a glint of gray and a spark of blue to my right, but I tilted my head to see nothing as the lights hummed with electricity for a brief second more. I was still alone. Yes, I was very alone.

Then the powering down once more, the pull inside me, the panic. I grabbed at the side of my head, clumps of hair clinging to my hands. The glint and the spark again, and I could hear the train coming.

Then I could clearly see what it was. I was motionless. It was motionless. He was motionless. His posture erect, his suit rigid and perfect and gray, the color of ash, the ideal image of order. His skin was gray. His hair was gray. His nails were gray. His lips were parted. But they were not gray, nor were they the color of flesh. No, instead they opened to expose light. A searing, false, blue light. He scared the hell out of me. The life, even.

I imagined this to be the feeling of looking into the void. He wasn't of light or of dark, only of desire and draining and want. His false radiance was draining my life away, draining my essence away, trying to fill in some unfathomable emptiness. The screeching of the rails became painful to my ears, and I scratched at them, but I felt like the train was too late to save me now. No savior for a broken girl in a suddenly broken world, cracked by his lips. The lips, the light that were both burning my eyes, my tears boiling down my face, my ear drums trying not to combust under the pressure and release me into flames.

There it was, the train, it was flying by, furious sounds of rage from the rails, and the strange blue light growing stronger with each doorway and window passing me by. It seemed to me then that they were in multitudes, copies of copies of copies of gray men crowding the subway. It also seemed to me then that I was genuinely shit out of luck. Then, for absolutely no apparent reason, it abated abruptly, no one but me, alone in the dark screaming a

silent scream. All was quiet. There was no train. There was no gray man. I exhaled and bit my lip, and reached into my bag, shaking, begging myself to please be insane, and pulled out a tiny flashlight that I carried for emergencies. This qualified as one. The metal was cool in my hand, almost soothing, almost reassuring, so I clicked it on.

Where there had been air, there were hands in front of me. Gray hands, with gray sleeves, and as I lifted my eyes upward, closed gray lips and closed gray eyes surrounding me, shoulder to shoulder. Their number was infinite. Their heads were down, as if in prayer. I clicked the flashlight off. I closed my eyes. I turned. I ran. What I expected was to be taken by a wall of gray creatures, but with my eyes closed I could only feel the cool air brushing against my face.

Hannah Conner

Planes

The protestors had begun to gather as soon as the caution tape was put up around the old library. They met in front of the building every day—their shouts encroaching upon Saul's breakfast hour—and were still there late into the evening after he had come in from work. Cheyenne barked constantly, running from window to window with the tags on her collar ringing out like an alarm inside the house. Saul took her for long walks, ignoring the protestors, but he kept an eye on a girl with a megaphone who screamed into it continuously.

Because he had once had vague ideas about one day running away to pursue a life of adventure, Saul had kept a backpack of provisions on him at all times when he was younger: a packet of crackers, bandaids, a bottle of stale water, a Swiss Army knife, a pair of extra socks—white with gray on the toes and heels—and a thin blanket referred to as his "baby covers." Every night for nearly a decade Saul's mother had flung it into

the air while holding on to two of its corners so that it fell like a patchwork parachute over him; its fluttering descent met his body with a small woosh of air that signaled the end of his day as overtly as a curtain call.

While the first notions he had ever felt of comfort and safety seemed stitched into the quilted teddy bears, framed by rectangles of brassy blue and red, that blanket could have never kept him alive through a winter night. Still, he had tucked it in with the other assorted items of similar ineptitude in a backpack that sagged heavily on his rounded shoulders. It accompanied him for years, never functioning as anything more than a pillow on which he rested his head as his body filled from core to skin with yearning.

Now Saul knew what to put in a backpack to survive in the wilderness; he spent all day teaching other people how to, preparing them to set out on backpacking expeditions up the Appalachian Trail. He had the capacity to live out any idea of adventure he might have come up with, but since leaving his wife that old feeling from his boyfood had begun to seep into him again. It made him feel oppressively young, but this time around there was a new sense of restlessness. When Cheyenne barked in the new house, it echoed off of everything that wasn't there, resounding through the empty rooms; the frequency, Saul felt, resonated in the roots of his teeth.

He hadn't realized that his wife Andy's things—books, furniture, houseplants, rugs—were the things in their home that absorbed sound. When he moved and she stayed behind, his belongings suddenly became antagonistic, making his footsteps fill up a hallway and follow him around the house like a ghost. Without her belongings tucked between his own, they became apparent for what they were—hard and flat.

His new bed had also been ailing him, and his nights were filled with dreams of wandering around in a desert. In the dreams his mouth was coated with dust and when he tried to dig into the ground with his hands for water, he felt his fingernails bending and ripping in the hard, barren earth. He would wake up thirsty, always disoriented by the strange room and his aching fingertips.

After weeks of this, Saul decided to take the tent from his car and pitch it in the living room where a couch would have been had he not been neglecting to buy one. He would try sleeping there. It was comforting to set up his tent. He had done it so many times

in the past that it was ritualistic and it moved his thoughts to the placid state of getting-something-done. Because they were such trustworthy acts, taking things apart or putting them together had always done that for him.

Andy—not having much patience for either of those things—used to sit against a tree and watch him set up the tent, timing him with her wristwatch; he could do it in a few minutes. And when they packed everything back in the car at the end of the weekend, she would stare at their campsite with her hands on her hips, surveying the area and nodding her approval at him. Saul could establish it to its original state before it had been camped on. Even though she had never said anything about it, he knew she had liked that about him.

He wondered if she still thought about those things when she was lying in bed all day.

Cheyenne had immediately entered the tent as soon as it was up and began walking in circles before picking a spot to curl up in. When Saul leaned over to crawl in after her, the scent of his dog mingled with the smell of dirt and smoke in the canvas and it stood like a wall in front of him.

There was the obstacle of nostalgia which brought first the memory of waking on a frigid October morning with Andy zipped into his one person sleeping back with him, their clothes crumpled in the bottom around their feet and the fire barely smoldering outside, then the memory of what she had said to him when she learned about the discrete failures of her womb: "It only matters what people can't do."

Those words had inhabited him like a fever; he knew what that meant. Lives were planned around what people couldn't afford or understand or endure, and theirs had been planned around something else. Mentioning alternatives, Saul knew, wouldn't have done anything because the problem wasn't that their plans had failed them, or that he had failed her, but that words that had been abstract before—words like "unhappiness" or "destiny" which they had made fun of in the past with mock dramatic voices—those words had become concrete in the way that a uterus twisted around a spinal column is concrete.

He began to think of sadness as different objects which belonged to people, like the faulty womb which belonged to

Andy, or the big empty tent that belonged to him; it's earthy dog and woodfire scent still blockading him out. It made him act weird and sad and stupid, but he kept it there. It also made him understand Andy's behavior too. She had been so talkative and energetic—countering his own careful shyness—but then she got slower, quieter, and then she didn't even get out of bed anymore. He understood, though he still blamed her. He would sit outside of his tent and run his fingers over the flap, the rough canvas humming against the callouses of his fingertips. Maybe he should take it down and buy a couch, he thought, but never did.

Saul moved into the house alone that they had bought together. They picked it because of its proximity to the big park and the library—both only a block away—and the public schools were pretty good too. It wasn't until after he had gone to the library that he found it half emptied with a sign on the door showing its closing date and a blueprint of the large new Recreation Center that was to take its place.

The evening the library had been demolished, there were books piled in mounds on the curb alongside the bricks and splintered lumber of the building. When Saul took Cheyenne out to the park, there were books under the ancient trees like dropped fruit. Kids ran around and chased one another at the top of a hill, their voices and the sound of cicadas dissolving into the air above their heads. Anthologies of literature, colorful picture books, cookbooks with the stains of oily fingerprints saturating their pages, large lettered children's books, small-lettered text books, atlases, history, philosophy, religion, all of them were husks on the ground, as Saul realized when he crested the hill that their pages had been torn from their spines by the children and were now soaring through the sky, folded into paper airplanes.

Jayce Cosper

Is That a Meth Lab in your Pocket...

I had my first real fight with my first real boyfriend, Tanner. Who knows what it was about? Miscommunication? Him liking his ex-boyfriend's status on Facebook? Fights are never really about anything. In a huff, I drive to really the only place I could think of that would soothe my weary mind: Taco Bell. The lobby is closed so I go to the drive-through and order something—a chalupa? a gordita? I'm never really sure. I just say what sounds the best. I wave to an elderly woman mopping the lobby. She mildly acknowledges my wave and returns to her floor. I pull over to the parking lot and eat, reading a Julian Barnes novel under my dim interior light. I spill some hot sauce on my shirt. Also, sour cream. I grab an old napkin from my backseat. I eat enough drive through to always have napkins and straws. If it stains, I'm totally forcing Tanner to by me another because this taco binge is his fault.

Tanner texts me, "Sry. Come back over, babe?" I reply that I'm spending the night at Courtney's. I'm really not all that mad anymore, but I need him to feel punished. Courtney, unfortunately, is working at Waffle House tonight (I hope Tanner doesn't go to drown his sorrows there). I'll just drive around until I get tired and then go back to my apartment. This is what I planned on doing, but after circling the same blocks like five times I begin to worry cops would think I was smoking pot or something because the cops in this college town have nothing better to do than give tickets to naïve students. I just assume driving in circles is a crime. I veer out of my loop and onto 33, and, onto the interstate. There is hardly any traffic. I like driving on the interstate with no traffic. I get to go faster than usual. I chain-smoke as I fly down the road, flicking cigarette after cigarette out the window, the sparks crashing onto the asphalt behind me. I keep driving. Soon I'm out of the county. Shit. Should I turn around? Nah, I keep driving until I realize that I could just go to my home town in like forty-five minutes. I make the drive.

I don't even know why I'm here. There's nothing here; no one here, really. Everyone from high school I'm friends with on Facebook but it's not like we get together for reunions. They're busy procreating and making minimum wage while I trudge away at

school. Lou's is still open, I note. The only twenty-four hours service station in town. I used to drink with my brother Daniel and we'd stumble over to Lou's for midnight snacks. It's across from my house, or my old house, rather. I pull into Lou's and get out, placing the gas nozzle in my car and swiping my card. I look over at my house, the windows shut up, a For Sale sign in the front lawn. Weeds have grown. My parents decided to sell after dad got sick. Most of what savings we had went to his medical bills and Daniel's schooling. I'm depending on loans and working my ass off to get through college, so I sometimes resent both Daniel and Dad for fucking me over. Mine and Daniel's tire swing is still there, on the one tree in the yard. If he was here I'd ask him to push me in it again. I suppose the swing makes the home more home-like so they kept it.

I replace the nozzle after I hear the "click" that tells me I'm on full. I go into the store. They haven't rearranged anything. I go to the back and grab a Gatorade, taking it to the counter. I rummage in my jeans for a couple of dollars, placing them on the counter. I look up, and immediately the cashier very nearly screams, "Jack!"

Oh fuck my shit, fuck, what the fuck? It's Steven, the guy whose life I ruined in ninth grade. "Hey," I manage, extending the vowel to sound excited.

"How have you been, man? God, you look great." He still looks the same. Skinnier. His hair seems greasy under his Auburn hat. He still looks like a sad dog, his eyes droopy and drowsy. He grins. Jesus, he's missing a tooth. He's one of those people. I have to get out of here. He's going to kick my ass. I told everyone he fucked his cousin just because he didn't want to fool around with me anymore. I'm a life ruiner. He's missing a tooth because of me.

"You know, just going to school. I'm an English major. I'm gonna teach and stuff."

"That's awesome, buddy. You were always so smart." He's still grinning, the non-tooth staring at me.

"Yeah, not really, I don't know." I hand him the crumpled dollars and he pushes them away.

"It's on me, man. I'm assistant manager here now. Second only to Lou's boy." Has his Southern accent gotten thicker? "Grab you a Moon Pie or something, too. Jesus, Jack Fielding!" Okay, he's definitely buttering me up to murder me. At least I'll finally be famous, like Natalee Holloway. My creative and critical pieces will

be dissected on Nancy Grace, a glimpse into a life cut tragically short.

"I'm good, but thanks, and it was really good to see you." I take my dollars and Gatorade and head toward the door.

"Hey, man, my shift ends in five. Do you wanna come over and burn one?"

I ruined his life. He has every right to murder me. I can't say no. Instead, "Burn one?"

He laughs, playing with the brim of his hat. "Get high. You're a trip, Jack."

"I mean, it's kind of late." Damn it, that face. He has that same look on his face, the one where I'd be burdened with religious guilt for blowing him, saying "Should we keep doing this?" and he'd get all sad and quiet. "But, sure."

His replacement wage slave arrives and I follow his truck to his house, a few blocks away. He doesn't live in the same place. I heard (from Courtney, who keeps tabs on everyone ever, really) that he got kicked out of his parents' house when he was eighteen. He'd been working odd jobs ever since. He'd dropped out of school, too. He was never that smart, but still. We arrive at his house, which I'm relieved isn't a trailer. He has a Beware of Dog sign on the yard which I read aloud as he meets me at the gate entrance. "Dog ran away," he shrugs.

He opens the unlocked door. The house is neater than I'd anticipated. The wall has pictures of Jesus on the cross. There are empty cans of Skoal and dipping bottles on the end table. The television is on mute, some Spanish soap opera. A very Southern female voice calls out, "Baby, is that you?"

"Who else would it be? You seeing another man behind my back?" The poorly hidden bruise on her left eye suggests that he's asked this question before, in a different tone.

She's wearing scrubs, her blonde hair wrapped up in a bun. She's mildly pretty but she has a multi-colored windbreaker over her uniform. She is not, as Tim Gunn would say, "making it work," either. "Is the truck still acting up? Making that noise?"

"What noise? It's fine, I told you. I'll take it in Monday if I hear anything. This is Jack, my old junior high buddy This is Mandy."

"Hey Jack," she reaches out her hand and I shake it. "There's coffee on the pot. I finally got Emma down. She's sleeping so ya'al

don't be loud. It was nice to meet you. I hate that I can't stay and chat but I'm already late." She scurries out the door, grabbing the keys from Steven on her way and kissing him lightly on the cheek.

"So you're married and have a kid?" I ask.

"Hell no! I'm never getting married. And I have two kids. One I had when I was nineteen but he lives in Florida with his mom so I hardly see him. I try to keep up on my child support but shit's tough, you know?" He kind of gawks at me, surprised that I still exist, and that I am here in his house. We sit down on the love seat together and he pulls out a sack of rolled joints from the coffee table.

I see also in the coffee table some tin foil and a straw. "What's that for?" I ask, praying he is just really into arts and crafts.

"Fuck. You didn't see that. Don't tell Mandy. I thought I hid that. I hope she didn't smoke weed earlier. Meth. I mean, I just do it when I'm really stressed with work or Mandy or the baby," he massages the joint in his fingers. Yeah, and I'm only gay on Wednesdays and Fridays.

I hand him my yellow lighter, he lights up and passes the joint to me soon thereafter. I inhale and choke out most of the smoke. He laughs and says, "Lightweight."

We smoke and he reminds me of the time he got me to steal his confiscated Pokémon cards back from Mrs. Robertson in 8th grade. He was always getting me to do stuff that may get me in trouble. We used to raise so much hell, he remembers. We didn't raise so much hell. He'd dare me to do stuff and I did it. He raised nothing.

He turns the station on the television. He has satellite, which is more than I can say for me. Maybe I didn't fuck him up that bad. He has a nice woman to feed him and such, every man's dream? We are watching BET. Rap videos, dancers in booty shorts. "I love this song!" He inexplicably gets up to dance, turning the volume up. Hello, sleeping child in the next room. I'm high, but not high enough to enjoy a now-stranger shaking his ass in front of me. I check my phone: three missed calls from Tanner. Steven nearly knocks over the coffee table reaching for my arm. I remain immobile. He yanks on my arm. Some people can't take immobility for an answer. I rise and shake my ass a bit to appease him.

"Yeah, you can have whatever you like!" he mock-raps. I do

my awkward white guy dance. He comes closer and suddenly we are dancing together. Are we fourteen again, doing a rendition of LFO's "Summer Girls?" Apparently. He thinks so. "Remember when we used to dance? I loved that shit." He reminds me to remember.

"You said it was gay," I tell him.

"What?" he turns down the music.

I say in my calmest voice, "You said it was gay. And, by implication, that I was gay. Which by the way, I am, in case you didn't get that message all the times I blew you. But I am not gay in the 'lame' way. I just like boys, and you made me feel like shit for liking them so don't try the nostalgia bit. I write papers tearing nostalgia to shreds."

He turns the mute on, his voice lowered all Norman Bates-like: "I think we both did some things we weren't proud of." And just like that, he smiles again. "You want some cereal or something?"

The Taco Bell was wearing off and I had the munchies. I hadn't smoked in a while, so I was pretty high. "Sure. You still like Cinnamon Toast Crunch?"

"Fuck yeah, dude." I follow him to the cereal, where he learns that he is out of milk. I look on the fridge. There is a post-it that reads:"Don't forget to bring milk home from work, babe!" He crumples the post-it and throws it in the waste bin. Now he'll never remember.

"Dry cereal is better anyway."

We eat, handfuls at a time. We eat the whole box and half a box of Captain Crunch. He replaces the box on the shelf. I still have a mouthful of cereal. He turns around and bites his lip. He kisses me. I push him away, swallowing the last bits of cereal.

"What the fuck?" I manage, trying not to be loud, per Mandy's request. "You're, like, married."

"Dude," he smiles. "Remember when we used to watch Double Back Door Debbie? I'd get so hot. And you'd fix me right up." He places my hand on his crotch.

"Yeah, well, I have a boyfriend who I actually care about. And if I had a kid and a wife—which is difficult for fags as you used to call us—I'd be a little more careful about not fucking it up."

"What we did doesn't make us fags, Jack."

"Well, I am one. I'm a fag, I'm a fag, I'm a fag," I taunted, hoping to take all power out of the word.

"Well, I'm not." He leans in closer. "But I've been with a shitton of girls and I never felt what I felt with you. We had a connection. We were actually friends."

"Join Facebook if you want friends. You used me, and I did a very shitty thing when you ended it, for which I apologize. I think we're both sorry. You have a good thing here. Don't fuck it up."

"I'm sorry too, Jack. I just get so lonely. Even with Mandy here. You were the only person who ever let me just be myself. I miss that." And he kisses me again. I allow it to go on much longer this time, too long. Okay, who am I kidding? We make out, legitimately. We'd never made out when we were kids, it was always just me blowing him. He grabs at my crotch. That never happened, either. I'm erect and I can feel he is, too.

"You want to try meth? It's great to fuck on. I have some Viagra so we don't lose our shit." Who said anything about fucking? And meth is beneath me. This situation is beneath me. Jesus, I'm not fourteen anymore.

"No thanks," I say, beneath his forcing his tongue down my throat. "You shouldn't do that shit, man." I pull away, trying to escape his ravenous mouth and hide my erection. I spy another Jesus poster beside the fridge—is Mandy Catholic? What would Jesus do? He'd knee Steven in the balls and go home to his boyfriend.

"It's not as bad as everyone says. Half the town does it." Yeah, I know. Like hockey is to Canada, meth is to our bumfucked town.

"I think I'm gonna go," I say, wishing my erection would go down.

"My mom and dad still barely speak to me. It's been years. I made a mistake when I was a kid. People still knew about it in my new school somehow. I dropped out. I couldn't take it." Guilt trip much? "You're the only person who's ever made me happy. Stay."

I give in. He always won. We strip down, making out, fall to the floor. I start to give him head and he flips me over and does it to me. It's the most intimate we've ever been, the most open he's ever been. It's like this is his audition for having something real. We take turns making love to one another, until we breathe out in resignation. I no longer care about the sleeping baby. We just kind of lay there for a while, each smoking a cigarette. I'm in his arms,

naked, vulnerable. We kiss and he laces his hand into mine. "I'm sorry," he says. Is he apologizing for what just happened or the past? Uncertain. We dress and I tell him I really have to go. Dawn is breaking. I need to do home and make it right with Tanner.

He agrees I should go. The baby will be up soon, wanting to be fed. He asks if I want to see her. I tell him all babies look alike and he smiles, that same smile that got me every damned time. He kisses me for what I know will be the last time, long and soft, his hand on my side. I head toward the door.

"Hey, Steven?" I say as I unlatch the front door to leave. He looks at me, having been looking in his coffee table for what I hoped was marijuana. "Thanks for the Gatorade."

He nods. "Don't be a stranger." He brushes the hair back out of his eyes and puts on his Auburn hat. He lets out a chuckle, to nothing in particular, and turns on the television.

I drive home, to my boyfriend. What's transpired is already in the past. It never really left the past. I drive out, past Lou's and the tire swing, looking up at the attic where me, Steven, and Double Back Door Debbie used up our childhoods. I see a road sign that says my campus is sixty miles ahead. It's daylight now, more cars populate the road, on their way to work.

Alicia N. Martin

Grace - Prologue

The room was hot. It was the kind of hot that comes with late summer when the leaves have wilted from the heat. The kind of hot that can only shine into unshuttered windows in a white room, desolate, save a few things: particles of dust that float, slowly, towards the blinding rays pouring in from the window panes; three bodies, two big and one tiny that the dust dances around; and row after row of long wooden benches warm to the touch.

It is also wet. There is water pouring in from somewhere. It makes the room look like a bleak sketch someone left out overnight and now no one could tell what it was, just that it had a vaguely rectangular shape and was seemingly made with four walls in mind. The water, like everything else in this room, was hot and all encompassing. It wouldn't go away. It was unrelenting, and irritating. Drip after drip making the world all blurry and moist, impossible to get off your skin.

And bright, making it even harder to see. The light could pierce your eyes, make your conscience lull into the back of your mind where nothing could be understood, make tears stream down your face. All of which are the exact reasons the boy is having such a hard time seeing the face in front of him. One blue eye and one green eye gazing at him from a big, crinkled face of rage and spit and shine, was that water too? Is the water pouring in on him too? As again another drip makes its way into his vision from his forehead, then into his mouth, and he tastes salt. Like the salt momma uses. Cooking. Cooking doesn't look like fun. But it tastes good, why does momma use so much salt it tastes weird, why is it hot where is she --

Now it hurts. The water, the light, the heat, they're all so painful, and throbbing. Suddenly he realizes the room is sideways and the big chairs are upwards and there's a big man in front of him and he's yelling his name.

"What the fuck I tell you boy? You ain't listenin' to me, ain't listenin' to me. Now get up off your sorry worthless ass or you're gonna get it again."

For a moment he doesn't understand, he just lays there like a child just awoken from a deep slumber with one little hand

by his head, like he's holding a pillow, eyes following but not comprehending.

"Get UP!" The man says as he grabs his brittle neck, lifting him to his feet as the boy winces and says nothing. He pulls him closer, so close the boy can taste something bitter when he breathes in, something his father drinks, something gold. He wipes at his lashes, where the mystery water seems to have pooled, removing the cloud from his face.

The big man's hand descends onto his crown again, giving him the terrible impression of what it feels like to have a giant's hand crush your skull like he had seen in a movie he wasn't supposed to watch one night when mom thought he was sleeping. He could feel every little indentation, every callous in the giant's hand, and pieces of his ragged fingernails.

When the pain subsided he realized that he knew the big man, knows him from Sunday's and isn't this church? Yes it is and that's Brother Mitch. He's so angry stop being angry I didn't do anything stop being angry STOP IT

"Look a' tha' Jim. You see tha fire in 'is eyes? That's the trace of tha' whorebitch o' yours, tha' leftover Satan in him. Lucifer. You wanna hit me boy, istha' it? HIT ME!" He bellowed, saliva flying into his face. The boy continued to stand, motionless, taking it all in. His white shirt was stained with sweat around his neck and under his arms, and his hair was dripping and leaking in all directions.

"Good." Brother Mitch whispers. "Good. You got fear in you. You afraid o' me and that's good, cause I'm gonna turn that into fear o' the Lord. There ain' no hope f'r you, you goin' to Hell no doubt, but we gonna teach y t' respect the ways o' this House, this House o' the Lord. You're Sin boy, never gonna change, but we gonna make you act like a God fearin' Christian so your whore of a mother will writhe in Hell."

His hands were roughly bound. The rope holding them together seemed to have splinters woven into its folds and he squirmed underneath its tightness. The other end of the rope was some distance away, knotted into the back of his father's truck.

"Annchent," the boy whispered, something his momma had said.

And it was. Ancient. Veins of rust grew over its surface so brightly it looked like the original blue hadn't put up a fight. It was a pure color dying in the wake of neglect. The exhaust was coughing black smoke and sputtering and the whole thing looked like a dying man who wouldn't give up his cigarettes, but damn if he couldn't yell – the engine roared suddenly as the boy's father grew impatient and put his foot on the gas pedal.

"I'M COMIN'," the boy heard Brother Mitch yell as he brushed his shoulder. The good Brother tossed in a wooden chair and clambered inside with his bearlike body, sitting, and resting his foot against the tailgate with an open bible in his hand. "Holy" etched on the surface in shining, golden letters.

He locked eyes with the boy and whispered, "It takes time to battle the devil."

And without anything more than a smirk, "...Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin." His fat hand fell against the tail of the truck, ringing loud and metallic. They lurched forward and for a moment the boy was standing silently as he watched his companions go...until the rope caught and he had to keep pace along with it.

"Heh. Tha's right, boy. You know what's in for you."

All he could see in the driver's side mirror was the outline of his father's tanned face, and dark, tangled hair.

Brother Mitch parted his uneven lips again, and flipped through pages. "...The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Which you won't be seein' anytime soon." Again he struck the end of the truck, this time with a fist, and the sound was deeper. The truck went faster, and the boy's steps quicker as his little legs tried not to trip on the rocks and dips in the unpaved roadway. Faster and faster the truck went, until he was jogging with his hands far in front of him, barely able to follow where they led.

The Brother sat his bible to the side with a noticeable thump over the sound of the engine and leaned forward, both hands resting on the edge of the truck bed and gave his biggest, best shit-eating grin. He nodded and everything seemed to be so far away, so very distant, as if this all had been a terrible dream and said, "... The soul that sinneth, it shall die."

He raised his hand above his head, waiting for that one

moment of dramatic flair, as such men are apt to do, and finally struck the side of the truck when the boy's breath became ragged and short but heavy. The engine roared, the truck jerked, and the boy fell, chin crashing into the dirt, tearing the flesh away quickly. His arms stretched above his head as his body scrapped the road in an unnatural position of prayer. His shirtsleeves ripped and shredded apart, red swiftly becoming the most predominant color he could see.

Gotta get up, gotta get up it hurts it HURTS so much!

He kicked his feet out against anything, any pebble he could get his foot on, trying frantically to regain his balance. For an instant he thought he had it, but this time his chin hit the ground even harder, and his lip busted open, teeth cracked. His wrists seared under the burning from the rope. It was splintering into his skin.

He was leaving a trail of blood in his wake. He strained his tired neck against the sky to see what was ahead of him and watched in slow horror as the tires of the truck skidded over a jagged rock as large as his head. This time he fought back harder against the road. His body twisted and turned and convulsed. He stifled a yelp as he clicked his teeth together and they protested from sheer agony. Two more seconds until it cracked his head open. One more...and he was running again.

"You better scream. Scream f'r y'r mother. But then again, she ain't gonna save you. The devil. The devil will devour your soul. Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of Sin."

His father, behind the wheel, never looked back. He only pressed the pedal harder.

With a final yank from the truck in front of him, the little boy felt his wrists crack, and he bit his lip.

"Ah, AH!" He awoke, the room around him white-hot and blinding with heat. His heart thudded against his chest. He sat up, feeling his sweat drip down his nose and stared at it collecting on the sheets. He hands then covered his eyes, a migraine overtaking him, and the scars on his wrists burned.

Ethan Taylor

Collecting Stories to Tell of a Childhood

1. My Father's Only Child

When I was a child, my parents, who married and divorced years before my conception, shared custody of me based on an oral agreement between them as reasonable adults. My father has never been a man who concerns himself with domestic indulgences of any kind and my days with him were spent away from his home; instead, he would take me to local parks or museums and share with me what he knew of the flora and fauna we happened upon. In the evenings we would return to his trailer and lay sleeping bags on the floor of the living room. This sleeping arrangement was partly due to the fact that my father did not (in fact, still does not) own a bed but mostly due to his protective nature: he preferred to sleep close to the entrance of whatever apartment, hotel room or trailer in which we were staying as a first line of defense against any would-be burglars. Despite my father's living quarters—which were always dirty, cluttered, and often stank for a variety of reasons—I cherished my days with him more dearly than those with my mother.

I grew up with a half brother—my mother's son from five years prior to my birth over whom she had full custody—who contributed a great deal to my preference of staying with my father. My brother, at least as I remember my early childhood, embodied the typical aspects of an older brother minus the part where he stops terrorizing his little brother long enough to show some affection by standing up for him in a sticky situation. In my case, my brother was the sticky situation. My father served me as both protection against and escape from what I perceived

as my brother's reign of terror. If my mother were working two consecutive days, I would typically opt to spend the night at my father's, especially for the five years of my own life before my paternal half sister was born. The days I spent as my father's only child remain in my memory as the romanticized image of childhood that many people carry with them throughout their adult lives.

True to the camp-like nature of my father's dwellings and sleeping quarters, we would often spend our nights together telling stories; most often, my father would read to me from his favorite books: White Fang, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, or some science-fiction novel he was reading at the time. I would lay perpendicular to him with my head on his midsection and listen with fascination as his voice, which is moderately deep and somewhat gravelly, rumbled from inside his chest. Occasionally, however, I would grow weary of the precise and verbose construction of my father's books and ask him to tell me a story from his childhood. I do not recall the first time I made this request and so cannot pinpoint the beginning of what became a father-son tradition. I only remember falling asleep to stories of my father's adolescent adventures: stories of him and his friends following railroad tracks like arrows to a pond to catch frogs, or moments of camaraderie when they would band together in order to stand up to a bully. My father, like me, was a small child—his voice belies his size even now—and he was often made victim to the bigger kids' whims at school. However, when I heard the stories of his triumphs, my five-year-old mind burned with all the imagination of a little boy listening to his father recite stories as though he were once a small child himself.

As I grew older I realized that my father's stories set precedents in my mind for the friendships that I developed for myself. Jimmy Poller reminded me of my father's stories, not for their specific events, but for the underlying morals of camaraderie and friendship. The day I met Jimmy was the first time I experienced for myself what had been to that point only an imaginary existence.

2. Collecting Adventures

I sat on the brick wall surrounding the front yard of the Bahá í Center. I was eight years old and my mother had just fussed at me for some reason or other—probably for interrupting her conversations with other adults with requests to leave because

I was bored—so I must have looked rather forlorn. A birthday party in the pavilion across the street caught my eye and I gazed upon the laughing, raucous boys (for so they all were) in fascination. My parents had chosen to home-school me—another manifestation of my father's protective nature—and I had grown unaccustomed to large group interaction. As a combined result of my relative isolation and my brother's seemingly ceaseless terrorizing, I found myself nervous in large or noisy groups of people, especially children, and had no close friends of my age. However, I do not remember feeling any particular longing for friends; on the contrary, I recall deliberately avoiding other people my age because I simply did not know how to act around them. Seeing the boys across the street, perhaps a dozen in all, enthralled me because I could not imagine enjoying myself in such a loud (and what I perceived as hostile) situation nearly as much as they all seemed to. In fact, they all seemed to be in their natural element, and I vaguely wondered if not empathizing with their rowdy conduct meant something was wrong with me. Presently, a boy I had identified as simultaneously the center of attention and the least engaged in the celebrations began walking toward me with a piece of cake on a plate. He waved to me as he crossed the street and held out the plate. As he approached me he said, "Hey, my mom said I should bring you a piece of cake because you look lonely, so I picked out the piece that says 'HAPPY' for you because I guessed you needed some. Do you want to come to my party?" As he asked the question, he gestured back toward the pavilion.

"My mom says I can't leave the yard," I explained with my mouth full, "but your cake is really good. How old are you?"

"I'm eleven today," he replied, "how old are you?"

"I'm only eight," I admitted, almost embarrassedly, "I turn nine on July seventeenth. Happy birthday." At this point, my mother came outside and asked me who I was talking to. Before I could explain, the birthday boy spoke up,

"My name's Jimmy and it's my birthday and I came over here to give your kid a piece of cake because my mom told me to." The way he explained that his mom told him to was not with a tone of resentment, but rather with that of an excuse. It did not occur to me until years later that bringing me a piece of cake might have been Jimmy's idea and he only used his mother as an excuse

to make it seem less weird. At any rate, Jimmy, who lived nearby, made a point of being at the Bahá í Center every week, and by my birthday two months later, Jimmy and I were best friends.

I celebrated my ninth birthday by spending the night at Jimmy's house for the first of many times. He showed me his attic bedroom and how we could climb out onto the roof from his window to watch the streetlights turn on. In years to come, we would spend countless nights on that roof, creating new constellations by drawing our own shapes between the stars, or writing profiles for characters in comic books we planned to produce, or catching fireflies that wandered close enough for us to grab without falling. On that first night, however, we simply sat in silence as I realized, even at nine years old, that this friendship would be the one that I would one day tell my own children about, awing them with tales of adventure and imagination.

Over the next two and a half years, I spent as much time as I could with Jimmy. My father no longer served as an escape after my sister was born. My parental options now included a tyrannical older brother or a little sister who produced an endless fountain of 5-year-old gibberish. My sister's infantile pontification irked me as only it could an older brother who finds that he must share the one parent he had to himself with a new familial addition. Jimmy's house became my new escape, my refuge. My parents, happy that I had such a close friendship with someone, were willing to correspond with Jimmy's parents to arrange my visits at nearly every opportunity. In those years, Jimmy and I lived a lifetime of stories for future generations.

I took to writing down our adventures, sometimes as straightforward reports and sometimes as heroic quests intended for our comic books. I shared these interpretations with Jimmy, who always received them well and corrected my spelling. He told me that I could be a great writer if only I learned how to spell. In return for my plotlines, Jimmy shared with me his drawings, which genuinely astounded me. He had a natural ability to draw, for which I always envied him. He could draw not only what he saw, but also things conjured from his imagination. He drew them as meticulously and accurately as though he were tracing lines already there. He told me that to him, the lines were already there—he just had to fill them in. He also developed the hobby of making jewelry from

hemp twine. I remember sitting on his roof as his slender, dexterous fingers twisted and tied each of us a matching bracelet. I wore mine for over a year without taking it off.

3. My Father's Only Son (Refrain)

As winter ebbed in anticipation of Jimmy's thirteenth vernal birthday, his parents started having marital problems. His father wanted more children but his mother, after three miscarriages since Jimmy's birth, simply refused to try anymore. That summer, they filed for divorce and Jimmy's mom made plans to move in with her sister in New Orleans, Louisiana. I did not spend as many days with Jimmy that summer because he spent his time trying to convince his mother to let him stay in Birmingham with his father. I do not know how hard of a fight Jimmy's father put up, but in the end it was decided that Jimmy would move to New Orleans with his mother in August so he would be able to start school on time.

My birthday that year was the last time I saw Jimmy in person, and we spent most of it in our standard hangout on the roof, saying anything that came to our minds but goodbye. I gave him the notebook I had filled with the adventures I wished we could have had that summer, as well as the few that we did. He gave me a sketchpad of drawings and his favorite Star Wars poster, a promotion for the re-release of The Empire Strikes Back. At that moment I was reminded of a story my father told me of when his friend Steven had moved to another school and I understood my father's description of being too sad to cry—the sadness fills you up so much that there's no room for tears to get out. I knew that our exchange of cherished effects signaled not only the end of our friendship but also the end of the boyhood that I had so carefully collected and recorded for my future children. I knew that night to be the end of the blissful, romanticized childhood that I would remember years later.

4. Picking Blueberries

The last correspondence I had with Jimmy was in the form of a letter, my reply to which he never read. In Jimmy's fast but neat handwriting, it reads:

Hey Ethan,

So far New Orleans sucks! The only good thing about it is some of the artwork. Too bad the worst thing about it are the artists. My aunt took me to an art festival with some really cool

stuff, but all the artists there just laughed at me when I told them I was an artist. Like the only way you can really be an artist is to set your stuff up at some stupid art show.

I hate the people at school even more. They all want to talk about LSU football. Last night I climbed up on the roof of my aunt's house. I had to climb on top of a trashcan and pull myself up over the gutter to do it. She made me get down and told my mom who acted like you and me didn't do it all the time.

Anyway, I'll talk to you later.

Your buddy,

Jimmy

The letter is dated November 12th, 2000; in May 2001, I received two letters from Jimmy's mother in one envelope. The first letter was dated March 23rd and explained that Jimmy was sick and in the hospital, the second was dated April 22nd and explained that Jimmy had taken his own life five days prior, on his fourteenth birthday. It went on to read that he had been in the hospital the previous month because he had taken too many of his aunt's pills. He was committed for three weeks, then released with a prescription for anti-depressants that seemed to help until his aunt found him when she got home from work on the evening of April 17th. His mother had been at the grocery store.

I did not speak of Jimmy's suicide to anybody for over two years, and I never told my parents. In early August of 2002, I met the person who would become the first to know my story of Jimmy's death, and who would also become my first best friend since. That friendship allowed me to develop others, as well as my eventual coming to terms with Jimmy's death, throughout my adolescence. I have friendships now that have lasted over twice as long as the one I shared with Jimmy. However, none of them have inspired stories for my as-yet unborn children to hear that live up to the standard set by my father's stories, which served as a backdrop to my life with Jimmy.

I still have the hemp-twine bracelet that Jimmy made for me that night on his roof. It is still stained with juice from the day in the spring before his parents divorced, when we went blueberry picking with his mother and each of us brought home a gallon of

blueberries, with which we made the best pie I have ever had. Later that day, Jimmy sprained his wrist when he fell out of his tree house, and I sat with him at the hospital as his cast was set and I wrote of his heroic attempt to fly. That day was the first time I saw Jimmy weep. That day was the first day I understood the story of my dad letting his friend Steven cry on his shoulder after Steven's dog was hit and killed by a car. That day is the one I will tell my children about when they get tired of listening to me read The Hobbit or Fahrenheit 451 and just want to hear a story about my own childhood adventures.

Matthew Lindon

Excerpt from Untitled

The two guys cross the kitchen, and the one that had been sitting suggests, "I always find introductions are better done behind closed doors, locked doors."

I like this guy and this sentiment, so I nod in agreement.

"Wellet's," Johnny says while spinning around, throwing a hand in the air.

The three of us follow Johnny down the hall, towards the front door; and, since I'm last in line, before the kitchen disappears, I look over my shoulder to see the other girl, not my ride, look to me, to us, with some kind of pain in her eyes.

I'm not alone in wondering about this girl, as halfway up the stairs, the guy that wasn't sitting asks, "You're leaving Ashley behind?"

"Fuck her, she knows the risk of being a girl at a party," the once-sitting guy says.

"What? Distracting annoying bitches?"

"More so: taking one for the team, whatever that may require."

"Thasya sisterma," Johnny says looking over his shoulder as he rounds the corner at the top of the staircase.

"She may be my sister, but that doesn't mean she isn't subject to the same rules as or of others. And for that matter how's your

sister?" The once-sitting guy asks, turning his head to face the other guy.

"What's that about my sister?"

"I asked how she was doing, but perhaps my question should have been in regards to whom."

"What are you talking about?"

"Jesus, Habo, nothing! Take a cue from Johnny and just laugh like a good boy."

We've reach Johnny's room and take our places while Johnny locks the door. Turning around to face us, and pulling something small and white from his pocket, he says, "Less introduce, boys."

"So these introductions are more introducing a substance to the system than it is name swapping?" I ask as Johnny produces a lighter.

"Pretty much," the one I believe to be called Habo answers.

"Stop being rude, Habo," the other starts, dodging a passing and exhaling Johnny before continuing, "Now that one isn't really named Habo, but it's what we do, and you will, call him."

"Habo," I say, nodding.

"Now, my name is Alexander, but this sonofabitch," motioning to Johnny, who is trying to pass the joint, "This mush-mouth just can't seem to spit that out of his incessant hole... So I'll suffer any phonetic sound resembling any form of the name Alexander."

I like this guy, so I call him, "Alexander."

"It's a long name, man," he says, now offering me the joint, which I decline. "So I won't blame you for shortening it."

"Canbalee yatwo ainmet," Johnny says over Alexander and Habo's outstretched arms.

"Why's that?" Alexander asks him.

"Yabo fulla shit, yabo dicks, and yabo tsmart."

Habo starts laughing while trying to pass the joint. Alexander has chuckled by the time Johnny takes the joint from Habo.

Alexander then turns to me and asks, "Oh, and by the way, man... What is she doing here?"

Before I can answer, Habo chimes in, "Yeah, the fuck is that about?"

I point to Johnny trying to pass the joint and say, "I'm sorry. I needed a ride, and she's the one that answered. This was, of course, before I knew of Johnny's party."

"Of course... Damnit, Habo, pay attention," Alexander says, trying to pass the joint.

"Oh," Habo.

I wonder how he feels about comics.

"Say, anyone read any comics lately?" I ask.

"No," Habo says, trying to pass the joint.

"I... No, not lately. By that I mean: I read a graphic novel, but I haven't read an issue in years. I mostly watch movies and read books, but I'll never have read as much as Johnny," Alexander answers.

Johnny, while trying to pass the joint, says, "O ya me, the buman."

Between hits, Alexander asks, "So what do you do, other than comics?"

"Oh, I don't know... Just about whatever it takes to escape from reality, I guess," I say.

"Well, this is the safest way to do just that... And since Habo isn't paying attention, you can find out for yourself," Alexander says with his arm extended towards me, joint in hand.

Just say no, wave your hand, do something- whatever it takes to not do something you don't want to do. Just do it.

I finally shake my head and realize Alexander is talking, "...all. Say that shit again, and see who wakes up where and when and in what... You asshole."

"What?" Habo asks while taking the joint.

"Oh... say what again, motherfucker."

"I don't know... about... things you're talking," Habo says trying to pass the joint.

"Gubo," Johnny says while taking the joint.

"I'm saying: if you say that shit again, then I'm breaking a bottle over the top of your skull," Alexander muses.

"Good hypothesis," I offer.

"Thank-" Alexander starts.

"Oh, don't encourage him," Habo pleads.

"No, Habo, shut your mouth. We're all tired of your name," Alexander says, pointing a finger.

"Shup! Yewanis?" Johnny asks holding a sliver of smoldering brown.

"Hell no," Alexander answers, waving a hand.

"For the record, you're the one that always says my name," Habo pushes.

"Yeah? Well you're always saying stupid shit, and not paying atten-"

"Shup, yewfax," Johnny interjects.

Everyone laughs at this; I figured one of them would have had something to say.

"So, another?" Alexander asks.

Habo and Johnny nod.

"I think I'll go downstairs and relieve..." I trail off, not sure if I got her name right, "of her duties."

"Ashley. And watch out for her, she's a mean bitch," Alexander warns.

"Oh, okay."

I stand up and walk over to the door. As I unlock it, I say, "I'll see you guys in a few."

I open the door and step out into the hall.

Alicia N. Martin

Talking to Leaves

Insanity reaches the mind like the noose wraps around the neck, you know. At least, that's how I felt. Feel. I don't really know anymore. I couldn't tell you which way is up or down now, but I can tell you that I have some damn good reasons for that.

I was 19, but don't lump me in with all of you youthful bastards, you partiers – because I had nothing to show save a receipt from my college on the cost of my tuition.

I went to school to be writer. I went to school to be an English major. I went to school to stop waiting. Waiting to be a writer; waiting to be a person. A real person. A real, live person. As in, I live in reality, thank you, I no longer attend a school or follow any set of ordained rules and guidelines – I am human, I am being, I am human being, I am one with my wishes, my instincts, my urges, myself, I am myself. I feel what I want to feel, I see what I want to see, I distort your world as I see fit, I rebel, I relax, I breathe.

But that's where I was guilty. That's where I was criminal. I was still waiting. How can I live when I expect to wait in line for the chance? By 19, I had accomplished nothing. I had never dyed my wind-beaten curls pink. I had never fought. I had never scarred. I had never tasted true defeat by the blood of anyone else, just my own where I constantly bit my lip to stifle my internal nature. To put it simply, I was the quiet nut-job lost in her own day dreams and real world schemes.

I walked a mile everyday to campus from my apartment in town, just me and my books. It was a quiet life, but that's when everything started boiling over on the inside, and I think that's when I cracked. My perfect glass shell of a woman, snapping into the ether, because that's when the paranoia set in. It was late Autumn, when the leaves ride the wind like stalkers and puddle at your feet, daring you to defy them. Autumn was my favorite. Running into giant piles of leaves as a child, building yourself a nest on the front lawn, holding a stick with a feather in your hair, throwing rocks at your neighbor's feet and diving into your secret lair. They couldn't understand your warlike double nature, hence the rocks and stealth.

I found myself walking home on a cold Monday, after my last class, feeling exhausted from the effort of being so patient. I was counting the bricks in the roadway, leading me back to the street that would take me home. One brick, two brick, three brick, three leaves, four brick, stop.

I'm falling. The leaves, I'm falling, they'll take me.

My heart skipped a beat and then raced twice as fast to catch up.

"What?"

My heart thudded in reply, saying you know what. I looked at my feet, and there lay a multitude of leaves before me, like they were trying to encompass me, steal me, steal the essence of me. They'll take me.

I felt dizzy trying to understand my last few thoughts and tilted forward on my now broken axis, and quickly turned it into a jump over the mound. If anyone saw that, they probably thought I had a hangover. That was ridiculous, maybe not just the thought of a healthy hangover, but the thought that the leaves were trying to kidnap me and take me away. It was like being in a half-sleep, when you don't realize you're dreaming, but you suddenly find yourself falling, tripping, and jerking yourself awake. Only this was real, and it happened over a fetid pile of leaves. I was as convinced of its truth in that second as Eve was probably convinced that the fruit tasted good, and I was tempted.

But I kept walking. Maybe it was lack of sleep because I was so anxious about playing big girl in the big world, and had tests to study for, and group projects to work on (alone), and rent, and groceries, and gas money, and bills, and home, body, and mind to think about. Mind. Hmm. Well. After all, the stresses of the everyday world are so cumbersome now. So, one brick, two brick, three brick, four: and home again we are.

My front door opened to the same creak and immediate silence it had had since I moved in. It was a comforting sound to endure, as it meant that I was awake, and that there was still a chance I hadn't mistakenly been slipped a hallucinogen. I promptly tossed by books down and place by butt up in a comfortable chair with my fingers clicking away at the best friend on speed dial. Yes, I have friends. They are corporeal. Well, some of them. This one was, at any rate. Given, that's questionable at this point since I was using a phone, but we will make an exception as this is part of the story that I don't want to get hung up on, no pun intended. Such is potential schizophrenia.

James Buchanan

The Reshaping

The event that occurred on December twenty-ninth, twenty-eleven reshaped Earth more drastically than any time since its birth nearly four point five billion years ago. On that day for a period of time close to ten minutes, it ceased to have a gravitational pull. Nearly ninety-nine percent of all life was wiped out globally.

Surviving scientists could offer no explanation. None of nature's laws that mankind had discovered provided an answer. Those people that still had religious faith after the event were equally lost as to why their god would throw away their world. Out of the many billions who died that day, these stories are some of those people's final experiences.

In Melbourne, Florida, Franklin Allen had spent all day worrying about his son. Mr. Allen taught physics at the local high school. He did not feel that his teaching was getting through to his students that day. They seemed to ignore what he was saying more than usual. He had been giving a lecture on gravity and momentum when the class stopped listening completely.

"OK guys, let's look at it in a different way," Mr. Allen said to the class.

"This is a simple example of how the Earth's gravity affects the Moon," he announced.

Mr. Allen started to swing a ball attached to a string in small fast circles above his head. "This ball is kept from flying away by the string. Think of Earth's gravity acting like the string. It keeps the Moon from moving out of Earth's orbit," Mr. Allen told the class.

He could tell that not much was getting through to his students with this little stunt. Half the class never even noticed the ball. The other half did not understand, except for one student who posed a question, "What keeps us from flying off the earth?" the student asked. "The string," Mr. Allen answered. He let go of his grip, sending the ball zooming into the middle of the classroom bouncing down the center isle of desks. The whole class looked.

The bell rang and before it had stopped the class was gone, leaving nothing but a room of flying papers and the door slammed shut. Just one more class to go and after that I can go see Joseph, he thought. His mind wandered back to the phone call, right before

his first class, when he had first heard about his son's accident from his ex-wife.

"What?! He fell off the roof? Is he OK? Did he break anything?" He asked. "He broke his neck," he repeated in horror. "I'm coming right now. What do you mean not necessary?!" he screamed into the phone. "I don't give a damn if it's not the weekend, I need to see my son!" he blasted at his ex. Minutes passed as he listened an avalanche of consequences that would befall him if he crossed her. His ex, through the help of her lawyer boyfriend, had been granted unholy power over Joseph. She hated Franklin and did all she could to keep Joseph away from him. "All right, fine I get it, let me come and see him after work for just a little while then," he pleaded. There was a silence then a reply. "Bye," he hissed before hanging up. He tried to calm himself down as the first class of the day took their seats.

Along a deserted coast line with clear water and golden sand walked hand in hand a newlywed couple. They were miles away from any other people. "Can you believe we are really here on our honeymoon?" Cilia asked.

"I know, it's still hard to wrap my head around," Nick admitted. "It's like an unending dream. Two days ago we were back in the States standing on a church altar exchanging our vows to one another surrounded by our families. I had no idea what to expect next. And now look, here we are in Hawaii on the most beautiful beach I've ever seen."

"I know, right? The sun is going to rise in a few minutes, and light up our new life together. There is no other place I would rather be than here in your arms," Cilia agreed.

She stopped walking and turned to face her new husband. Digging her toes into the sand Cilia wrapped her arms around Nick's neck and kissed him. With the Sun cresting the Pacific horizon, and the tropical green of the jungle at their backs the couple stood together watching the last sunrise they would ever see.

"You and I are right where we should be." Nick told her, "We were meant to be together, and nothing will keep you from me now that I have you."

With the eruption of a national revolution in Iran, the oil markets went into a total panic. The price of oil seemed to never stop rising after that. Gasoline reached twenty dollars a gallon. The global economies were shaken to their cores.

Just as America had clawed its way out from beneath a crushing recession, it was hurled back under. This time it fell into a depression that nearly tore the county apart. The discontentment of American people for their government was becoming a real danger when they took to the streets. Gas riots broke out all over the country. In the major cities, the riots lasted for weeks at a time.

The leaders in place had to do something to inspire their country to get behind them before society dissolved into chaos. They looked back into their past and did something they had not done in many years. They set their sights on the Moon.

The President meant for America to be the first nation to put a woman on the Moon. The gambit was a successful one. United again, the country got behind the effort. "Back to the Moon" became the rallying cry of America. The national fervor and excitement for the challenge was so great that other nations began similar programs to beat the U.S. Russia being the first to compete with America in this effort, inspired China, India, and Brazil into joining the mad dash to reach the Moon. The greatest international space race was born.

In the middle of the bright side of the moon, stood astronaut Sharon Fisher slowly breathing her air supply as she watched the light of the sun reach New Zealand. She had landed safely and without much incident securing her and her country's place in history. Sharon was a small town girl from the Mid-West. An accomplished astronaut, she had been to space many times before, but this moment defined her career.

"Mission Control, do you read?" she asked into her com link. "This is Mission Control; we read you loud and clear." Control replied. "I had to bring her down in LZ two. I had too much speed coming in to risk a landing in LZ one" She informed Control. "You got there in one piece, and that's what counts. You have done a great thing for your country, Captain Fisher," Control congratulated her.

"Thank you, Control. I did it for my country and her people's spirit," she replied.

Sharon enjoyed a view that only a handful of people before her had been privy to see. The huge biosphere hung in the black of space before her eyes like a thought that would not leave the mind. The blues, greens, browns, and whites all swirled in a seemingly unyielding fashion. She saw the Western hemisphere and stared at it for a very long time. I am from right there, she thought. She lifted her hand to try to touch the planet, it felt so close to her. The overwhelming nature of the image of Earth in front of her tied her tongue.

"Control, I can't tell you what it is like up here," she managed, "only that I am one of the luckiest people to ever have lived."

"Captain Fisher, are you ready for your address to the nation?" Control asked. "You go live in five min-" The signal went to static.

"Control? Come in Control, do you read?" She asked. She only heard static over the channel.

Sharon didn't try the com link again when she saw what was happing to Earth. In only a few moments the Earth had rendered her speechless for a second time, this time not from awe, but from a paralyzing horror, as she watched the planet's oceans expand out into space. The distance the oceans were flung was greatest at the equator and least at the poles. From the land mass she saw what looked like a grey brown dust rise up and obscure the clarity of the rich colors below. The sapphire blue of the oceans turned to a deathly white as the water froze when it reached the upper layers of the atmosphere. What is happening?, she thought as the unbelievable image continued to unfurl itself before her. The Earth she saw before her was a hideous perversion of what it should have been.

Those people who were in buildings slammed into the ceiling at over a thousand miles per hour. Those buildings whose roofs did not break away were covered in broken people and smashed furniture. In subway tunnels all around the world trains were pancaked to the tops of tunnels. Any boats at sea were carried up into the air by an unleashed ocean. Planes in the sky were safe at first. However, most were carried away by the oceans bashing into

the bottom of them. Others, those over land, collided with flying debris of all kinds. Those souls who were outside left the surface of the ground straight up into the sky. It happened so abruptly and with such great force that most people were dead in less than a second. Their bodies were broken by colliding with overhead objects. Many hit telephone wires that sliced them apart. Many hit or broke through buildings. Others tore through trees, smashing their bodies to pieces.

Some survived the forces of their bodies leaving terra firma, and saw the earth down below them shrinking smaller and smaller as they moved toward the stars. Many believed they had died of a heart attack and what the witnessed were their souls leaving Earth. Others who understood what was going to happen to them cried all the way up to the frozen death that awaited them.

The school where Mr. Allen taught was just letting out the last class of the day when the event happened. Mr. Allen had made it to his car and was waiting to get on the turn that would lead him out of the school parking lot, when he flew away from any chance that he had of seeing his son. "Joseph, I'm sorry," he managed to say before his car smashed into a passenger plane and exploded into a fireball.

Nick and Cilia embraced one another for a long time watching the sunrise over the Pacific ocean. Their last thoughts, before the event, were on their promises to each other, of a future together that would last long into the coming years. Those promises were taken away the moment their feet left the ground. In each other's arms they stayed as higher and higher they soared upwards into the morning sky. The sand they stood on flew up with them spreading apart under their feet like a giant golden cloud. The ocean at their side gushed upward in a solid wall of water, leaving the coast line a barren place. Together they held on to one another with a sand storm beneath them, and a tsunami beside them; they would not be separated. They died in each other's arms, holding on till the end.

Sharon saw Earth tear itself apart for ten minutes. Then, as a shepherd calls his flock home, the globe pulled back all it had lost. The mass of people, animals, vehicles, buildings, and chunks of Earth rained down on land. The incalculable weight of the world's water came smashing down back to the surface in one massive

frozen hammer stroke. This sent shock waves through the planet so massive that Earth's crust broke open along the fault lines. Its molten blood gushed from its fresh wounds. The planet's reshaping was in fire and ice.

Sharon fell to her knees. She saw the white belt of ice wrapped around the Earth's equator. She saw the seas wash inland hundreds of miles. All around the globe she saw the red glow of volcanoes and lava flows. Her body went into shock and she fell on her back. She could not stop looking at what Earth had become.

Her mind raced with thought, I must be the last living person. All my family, all my friends, gone. All, everyone gone. Her mind could not comprehend it. Sharon Fisher lay inches deep in Moon dust, watching the Earth shift away from view and the Sun replacing it. This meant something, but she still could not make her mind think properly. Soon though, the answer to her riddle blew up in her mind. The Moon is sailing towards the Sun, she thought.

"The whole wold wasn't enough for you, God?" she cried. "Now you want to send the Moon off to be incinerated in a star-shaped Hell!" Tears ran from her eyes in two long streams. "Fine, take it all then. It doesn't matter now. There is nothing I can do to stop it." She cried till she didn't fell like crying any more. "That's all," she told herself, "That's all you give him." Why am I the last one alive?, she thought. Why did I have to see it? Who will I tell?

"I have lost myself," she whispered.

Sharon's space suit started to brown as she was being cooked alive from the heat of the Sun. She felt the skin on her face dry, then crack apart. Not once did she scream from the pain. She stared directly into the face of God. She did not shield her eyes. Sharon went blind from the rays of light. This made her feel joy, because she would never again have to see her once beautiful home in so much pain.

A completely new feeling flooded through the fibers of her being all at once, and without end only grew stronger as time passed. It was not anger, or sadness. Nether joy, or regret. It was a peacefulness that wrapped itself around her and became a part of her. In her mind she saw Earth how it was. She saw her life on it. Sharon took a deep breath then exhaled and cracked her space suit.

Madison Percy Jones IV

The Hunter

To My Father.

In Search of Wilderness

We walked as pilgrims
One cold winter morning.
Trading daily comforts
With their calm monotony
For this uncertain freezing mist
On Talladega's Dugger Mountain.

We marched as soldiers
Through that once holy land;
The great Pinhoti1 of Creek Indian.
Their Hallowed hunting ground reduced
To unmanned recreational wilderness.

The sacred chanting now replaced
By clamor of heavy white feet.
The howl of wolf and lion drowned
By clangor of busy machinery.

So camped our final night, we lie
Bathed with icy moonlit glow
In Cheaha's still and silent air.

A noise appears severe and strange
Some ancient false resound.
A distant drum and feet and chant
Still howls across the night.

1Pinhoti is a Creek Indian word meaning "turkey home". The Pinhotti trail runs from Alabama to Georgia in what is now known as the Talladega National Forest.

William Bowles awoke to an indiscernible grayness. It was impossible to determine what time it was outside the bivy sac. Inside, there was only the struggle for warmth and the knowledge that it was still not time to rise. His feet began to chill and writhed like worms deeper into the warmer part of the sleeping bag's shelter. They began to warm and he could feel the blood trickle into them. He closed his eyes and felt his body sinking in his cocoon, settling softly into the earth. All around him the rustle of the leaves and the tall grasses seemed to swim and hum, lulling him back to sleep.

When he awoke the sun was late into the afternoon sky. He sat in the silent shadows of the trees, contemplating his quest. He was surrounded by 7,000 acres of raw Alabama wilderness. All around him the longleaf pine stretched out their ancient limbs. The forest was, for the most part, undeveloped and relatively unknown by its surrounding inhabitants. The Cheaha wilderness preserve was situated right in the heart of the Talladega National Forest, one of only a handful of large wilderness tracts in the state. Here lived large quantities of white-tail deer, turkey, bobwhite quail, rabbits, grey and fox squirrels, even the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker and the flattened musk turtle.

The wind moved slowly through the needles of the long leaf pines, passing through the edge of the forest. It blew across the grassy clearing, drifting back into the dense treeline.

Will rustled uneasily in his sleeping bag. He was 16 years old and for the first time completely on his own. He'd dreamed up this sojourn over a year ago. For his last birthday his father gave him a Savage, model 110 30-06, deer hunting rifle. The waxy birch stock shined like new money. His father had scrimped and saved to buy him that gun, and every time he saw it he knew his father loved him. Though they spoke rarely since his parent's separation, he knew the hours his father worked to pay for such a fine rifle. When Will looked at the gun he remembered how his father used to point at rocks and trees and bugs saying their names and looking at him to repeat them back. He thought about how proud his father was the day that Will named anything his father pointed to.

Staring at the dark stock and barrel, Will had first dreamed of his spirit quest. He decided to attempt it over winter break. Alabama winters were very tolerable and his bivy was more than

adequate to keep him warm. He collected ten days worth of rice and lentil beans for his dinners and nuts and dried berries for his other foods. He brought along his book of edible Alabama plants and of course, his rifle. He meticulously researched how to dry meat in the wild. He spoke with his friends about the best ways to stalk and kill a deer. Will picked and dried nearly an ounce of psilocybin cubensis over the spring. He stuffed them into an old pot pie box and hid them in the back of his mother's freezer just for the trip. Every night he planned to make and drink the tea from the mushrooms until the day he killed his first white tailed deer.

Since his drop off Will had busied himself by locating a good site and building a modest stick and moss hut he could tuck his bivy into to increase his warmth. His little hut was located in the center of a small field, surrounded by thick woods. The clearing was appealing to Will. It had a wide open feeling and despite the evening breeze that passed through, it was comfortable. There was a good stream less than a mile from the clearing according to his map. He built a fire pit using large chunks of quartz and shale. He made the pit deep and wide, stacking a layer of shale, then setting the chunks of quartz on top. He spent the rest of the afternoon searching for the right stalking ground for a deer.

The pine straw crumbled under Will's heavy footsteps. Will remembered the first time he'd gone hunting with his father. The frozen clay resisted each step like concrete. He loved the crunch of the leaves in the wintertime. His father showed him how to walk softly, masking the crunch with each step.
"Just like an indian" he used to say.

The .22 he'd just given him bobbed awkwardly slung over his shoulder. It made him feel like a warrior. The heavy rife sat hard against his back. Will sucked in cold wind, it burned his lungs. The two wandered in the grey mist for hours in silent meditation. Their silence was broken only by his father's catechisms.

"Whada ya call at t'won Wille?" Will asked aloud in a strange monotone voice.

"That's a Water Oak" he answered.

"An this one?"

"It's a Cedar"

"That's a good boy. Now what do you call this one here?"

It had been a Saw-tooth Oak his father pointed to that cold

morning. He didn't recognize it because he'd never seen one. His father picked one of the leaves and told Will to bring it home with him. That night he gave him a book of Alabama Plants. Will reached into his pack and rummaged around until he found it. He flipped through the yellowing pages as he walked.

Less than a mile from his hut he found the perfect spot. It had all the right things, a luscious clover pasture, a nearby stream and good tree cover that wasn't so dense as to make the kill shot impossible. Will scanned the area for a few minutes before he found large deer pellets. He mashed them in his fingers, they were moist and fresh. Will walked toward the streambed. Along the banks he found footprints.

"Footprints pointing toward food means they were left during the afternoon, toward bedding means morning" his father said.

Will stared at the prints in the sand, trying to decipher them. They looked over four inches, meaning it was either an adult doe or a young buck. The tracks were deep in the sandy shoreline. Will reasoned that an adult doe probably weighed more than a young buck, he bet it was a doe.

Satisfied, Will returned to his campground.

He crouched in the dirt, shaving twigs onto the bed of leaves he'd prepared. Just two days ago he'd nearly burned his father's tool shed to the ground. He hid back there in the day to smoke cigarettes. It offered a place of refuge from his mother. She never went out there, even when his parents were still together. When his father left, she looked on the place like a bad memory. That woodshop always made her nervous, the sharp blades and loud machines. She always complained about the chipping paint, the brush and Virginia Creeper which threatened to reclaim the dilapidated building. Kyle and Chase came suddenly around the corner. Will tossed his cigarette down in shock.

"Jeezus Man, you scared the shit outta me!"

"Oh what, you scared your mom's gonna catch you smokin again? You are such a pussy."

"Fuck you Kyle, I'm not afraid of her. She's got enough to worry about, She catches me smoking ittle be all she thinks about. Plus, I don't wanna hear it from her."

"Whatever man, you think you aren't gonna hear about it

when you run away?"

"Yeah man" Chase chimed in. "She's prolly gonna call your dad. He'll come find you and kick your ass."

"Bullshit dude, cuz you two aren't going to tell them shit, are you?"

"Nah, I won't. Dunno about Chase's big mouth tho"

Will grabbed Chase by the collar.

"Chase if you say anything, I swear Ill come back and kick your teeth in, ok?"

"Ok man, I swear, chill out"

The three boys spit into their hands and shook.

Unknowingly, Will had thrown his cigarette down into the wood shavings under his father's planer. The next morning the wall of his shop was blackened, but nothing was destroyed. His mother was furious.

"Your father might not be around, but if you think you can walk all over me, you are wrong! Consider yourself grounded for the rest of winter break!"

When they dropped him off at Mulberry Gap both boys looked afraid. No-one spoke except with nervous laughter.

"You sure you wanna do this man? I don't get why you won't let me and Kyle go with you"

"Look, this is something I just gotta do by myself, I'm going to be fine. Stop being a couple of pussies. You look like you're at my funeral. Just be here on Sunday around noon, so I can be back in time for school. That gives me five days, I know I'll find a good buck by then!"

"You be careful eatin those shrooms. Some mighty weird shit happens to you out in the woods" Kyle said. "Just remember we'll be back no matter what, ok?"

"Ok" Will said, shutting the door.

The pair watched from the truck as he walked away without looking back.

Will tried to fight back the feeling of defeat as he walked back from the stalking ground. He'd spent all day without seeing anything. He wondered if the tracks he'd seen were really from a doe. He noticed a scurry of squirrels flouncing among the trees. He stopped and took aim. His .22 felt light in his hands compared to the big rifle. The rifle kicked hard as a squirrel dropped from the tree

limb. He thumped hard on the ground, stone dead.

Dinner was marvelous that night. He sat with the skewered, roasted squirrel, savoring each bite, watching the sun set blood red into the tree line in the west

Now Will turned from the setting sun to his tea. He removed his kettle from the fire and strained the tea from the mushrooms. He then poured more water into the kettle and replaced it in the fire. Will turned back toward the sunset and sat blowing on the steaming cup. The tea had a meaty flavor which Will found not entirely unappealing.

As the darkness rolled over the landscape Will began to feel a kind of rumble. It felt like a gentle humming emanating from the leaves on the ground and the limbs of the trees as the wind passed though them. He felt the humming slowly returning. Will lay back and stared deep into the harsh tunnels of coals which glowed ancient red in the small fire. The soft wind blew through the tall grasses, lulling him into a deep trance. It whispered those soft thoughts without words. The sky was cloudless and Will could see stars by the thousands. The brighter ones left subtle tracers of light when he moved his head back and forth. Back and forth. Back.

Will heard a coyote howl and shuddered a little. He looked around to try and shake off the feeling. He was not alone out here. It was as if some shadowy specter lurked just beyond the tree line. He could feel the figure prowling. There was a presence out here which was in no way welcoming to mankind. His leather bound notebook lay untouched, just out of his reach. Will tried to think of something to write in the book. It was impossible, not a single word could describe this experience. The trees, the leaves, the rocks, the red Alabama clay, hummed and the wind whispered through the long grasses to Will. He strained to make words from their whispers, mouthing silently in the dark. After a long time the hum got quieter and the trees whispered softer. He had to concentrate to hear it at all. He crawled into his bivy and lay a long time listening.

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When Will awoke and peeked out from his bivy it was cold, and the gray light indicated that the sun still sat far below the tree line. He climbed stiffly from the sack and stretched his sore muscles, yawning.

This was the best time, his friends told him, to get in position. The plastic canteens sloshed heavily in Will's slack pack as he made his way to the stalking ground. By the time he arrived at his spot the light had become intense and the sun was beginning to creep over the tree line. He settled into his spot, setting his rifle on a rotting log and lay very still. Despite feeling ill from the mushrooms Will had forced himself to eat a bowl of oatmeal before leaving camp. Now he could feel the oats slop and slosh around in his stomach. He concentrated on his breathing and it seemed to settle his stomach a little.

The hot sun beamed down on him now, making him drowsy. His head throbbed and his eyes hurt. He closed his eyes and began to drift. He was lying in his bed. The moose quilt his mother bought him wrapped around him as he sank into the sheets.

He jerked awake at the sound of crunching leaves. Will quickly looked up, just in time to see a doe bolting away from the patch. He tried to draw a bead on her, but she was gone before he had any chance at all. Frustrated, Will sat up and took stock of his surroundings. It was nearly mid-day he guessed by the sun's position in the sky. Or was it one? Will strained to remember which direction was east. His head hurt and he felt very nauseous, so he decided to give up the hunt for the day. After drinking some water he felt a little better, and decided to scout for edible plants and berries.

Within a few minutes Will discovered a large Muscadine vine which, had it been August instead of January, would have been heavy laden with fruit. Now dormant, the vine didn't even have any leaves on it for him to eat. He walked on for only a little ways before he discovered what he hoped was a chicory bush. He looked at the yellowed drawing in his book. Will searched around until he found a usable stick and troweled the earth out from around the large tube roots of the plant. Soon Will discovered enough of the small plants in the area to make a wonderful addition to his supper. He also discovered a Black Birch tree. Will picked many of the young twigs, chewing thoughtfully on some, and stuffing the rest into his pack to make tea for later. Will was excited about the twigs, he knew that when made into a strong tea it functioned much like Aspirin and could help ease the unpleasant side effects of the psilocybin. He even managed to gather about two handfuls of acorns from under the leaves around a giant white oak tree.

Will sat down on a log to eat some gorp. He thought he heard bulldozers rumbling off in the distance. He thought about how worried his mother probably was. He wondered if she had called his father yet. He hope Chase and Kyle wouldn't tell, they promised not to, they swore. He didn't think they would.

Pack heavily laden, Will made his way back to camp.

He started cooking the chicory roots with the acorn meat and boiling the twigs from the birch to make tea. He gathered wood for at least an hour and piled it up nearby. Slumping down onto the ground he set to work straining his tea into a cup, he began cooking the beans and rice, adding the chicory as he went.

By the time his lentils and rice were finished cooking the sun was moving close to the tree-line. Will held his hand out in front of him. He was able to put two fingers between the trees and the blazing red orb. His father told him that each finger meant thirty more minutes of light.

Hesitantly he began making the psilocybin tea. He finished his dinner and began drinking the first pot of tea. This time he was ready. He'd made a huge pot of the birch wood tea and set it aside for morning. He nervously sipped each sip from his cup. It was when Will took the last sip of the second pot that he heard the man. Well, it sounded like a man. It was strange, first he heard the breathing, not his voice, not his steps, his breath. Like a storm cloud the thunderous whisperings of the pant spread out through the long grasses. Will turned his focus in the direction he thought the sounds came from, but no sooner had he done this than the sound of feet crunching leaves came from the opposite direction. Will clutched his gun tight, pressing the cold wooden stock against his chest. Could his father be out there looking for him? Out there lurking. Beyond the tree line. He looked around wildly, seeing nothing. Only the trees and the silent grasses swaying in the wind. After a long time the silence convinced him it was a hallucination. He realized the fire was dying, and couldn't decide whether to put more wood on it or to gather up what he could carry and run like hell into the woods.

He took a deep breath and set some wood on the fire. As the dry logs began to take they crackled, flamed and cast twisted shadows across the field in all directions. The shadows took on solemn forms that slowly moved against the backdrop of the trees like a procession of monks. As the fire picked up its blaze their

movements became wild, like some kind of ceremonial dance. Will wondered about the Muscogee Indians that once foraged and hunted this very area. They talked about the Muscogee in his history class. He wished that he could meet one. He remembered learning about how many of Alabama's city names were from the Indian language. The Pinhoti trail that ran from the northern terminus of the park in Piedmont all the way to the southern terminus in Weogufka, south of Sylacauga was called by a Muscogee name. Pinhoti, in the Muscogee language meant "turkey home". He felt them dancing in the shadows of the firelight, calling him forward, calling him home. He could see their tall thin figures dancing, the turkey feathers in their head-dresses swam though the air. He felt a warmth glow within himself as he watched those shadows. His fear melted and he was reborn, baptized in the vision of those shadows. He saw the fear that lived in his heart, he now understood the nature of his isolation, not out here, but in the other world. That world was not his home. That world grew like a cancer and swallowed this world whole. It grew and grew till only this tract of land remained. There he was alone. There he was misunderstood, unwanted, unloved. He felt a part of what lived here. The shadows embraced him in the flicker of flame. They nodded and flailed slower, quieter.

The last flame flickered out, startling him from his trance. He frantically threw sticks and logs on the fire to bring back those specters but, as the flames grew, he knew they were gone. He crawled into his bivy and lay a long time, hoping the figures would return to his thoughts. No shadows found him then, only the darkness and the cold.

***

The next morning William woke up vomiting. Hot tears welled up in his eyes as his stomach emptied itself onto the ground. The smell of the vomit made him wretch and gag. Will kneeled a long time until he felt his stomach settle some. Shivering, he set some pieces of kindling on the coals of the fire. The heat of the coals burned his face and the icy morning wind stung his eyes and nose. It cut through his clothing like a knife. He tried to stand but spastically fell over, face first into the dirt. The earth spun, his stomach reeled. He could feel the red mud covering his face. Will rolled onto his back and stared up at the grey sunrise. He gathered his strength

and dragged himself into the bivy. He lay for hours swimming in a sea of dizzy sickness. When he peeked out of his bag is was nearly noon. He drank some birch-wood tea, but puked it back up. Will realized that he was out of water. He tried once more to rise and this time succeeded. He found his water bottle and reluctantly started off in the direction of the stream. His legs ached, his head hurt, his brain rattled in its skull. The walk down the mountainside was treacherous and Will slipped and slid several times before he reached the streambed. He stopped and vomited again before pumping the water through his clay MSR filter. He looked at himself in the pool of water as he pumped the filter. He could barely recognize his face. It was covered with dirt and pieces of pine straw. His eyes looked sunken and hollow. He looked like a ghost. A piece of twig fell from his curly fluff of hair, disturbing the tranquil creek water. He slowly made his way up the mountainside, the path was so steep that at times he had to crawl on hands and knees. The dirt and leaves clung to his body each time he fell. Thorns and briars viciously attached themselves to his clothes and skin. The rocks hurt his hands as he clutched and pulled. He summited and lay on the mossy overlook. After a while Will felt strong enough to stand. He ambled back toward his camp.

As Will approached the break in the tree-line something stopped him dead in his tracks. A very large turkey feather stood in the middle of the pathway, stabbed deep into the red Alabama clay. The feather shone in the afternoon sun. He just stood there in disbelief, blinking and rubbing his eyes. He felt dizzy again, the air and grass began to swim, making him sick. He stooped again and vomited. It was dry, and the tears poured from his eyes as he kneeled there, dry heaving.

Will knelt there awhile, wondering who could have left this feather and why. The black parts of the feather had rivers of green hues which shone through in the sunlight. He spun the feather in his fingers, wondering if it could've been the man he'd heard in the night. But then, he wasn't really sure he'd heard a man in the night.

Dinner went well for Will that night, he was able to keep down his food. He ate a huge pot of rice and beans, and drank some birch-bark tea. His headache eased a bit and he stretched out to watch another beautiful sunset. He didn't even dare to entertain the thought of taking any more mushrooms. Ever again in his life.

The skyline was marvelous, Will felt so happy as he stared at the sinking sun. He felt much better now. As he stared at his feather thinking about the shadows, about the Muscogee. They didn't wear headdresses, people always mixed them up with the Sioux. He hoped this feather would bring him luck tomorrow. He was excited that night as he went to bed, but fell fast asleep as soon as he settled in.

***

Will woke up long before the sunrise. It was very cold in his bivy, he could see his breath. The grass under him crunched as he began to stir. Will gathered his tools and lay them out beside his guns and slack-pack. He sat eating a snickers bar, staring at his supplies. Extra bullets, salt for curing meat, extra water, a poncho and Doe urine were only a few of the things Will arranged before him. He walked down to the stream and washed himself off. In hopes that he could get the stink off of himself he changed his clothes and sprinkled deer urine on them. He got back to his site, packed his things into the slack-pack and headed back to the stalking ground.

Once there, Will picked his spot, dumped out his gear and hunkered down. He covered himself with straw and branches, readied his rifle and settled in. He lay there for hours thinking about his friends, how different they would seem to him now. He thought about how different everything would seem to him now. None of them can ever call me a pussy again, he thought. He felt as if he had been cleft into pieces which could never be put back together. His mother and father must be so worried about him by now. He wondered if the police had been called, if Kyle and Chase had been questioned, if the trip had been compromised.

Suddenly, Will noticed a stirring in the brush. A young buck stalked out of the deep brush, strutting toward the pasture. Will carefully drew a bead on him, breathing slowly. Just as his father had shown him, Will inhaled slowly and then exhaled as he pulled the trigger. The shot was deafening, destroying the morning silence. Birds took to the air, the deer flailed wildly. Will looked on in horror. The buck staggered forward screaming. No one ever told Will that the deer would scream like that. The sound was sickening, Will could see the red stream of blood pouring down the buck. The buck fell over with a horrible grunt and Will approached it where

it lay in the grass. Its eyes looked grey and weak and he growled at Will as he approached. Will pointed the gun between the deer's grey eyes, trying to shoot without looking. He missed and the sound frightened the deer, making him frantically try to stand. He yelped and screamed and grunted and growled. Will aimed again. He looked the deer in the eyes as the hammer fell, this time hitting the deer in the skull. Blood rushed down the deer's face, Will's eyes clouded with tears. No one ever said that it would be like this. No one said it would be so bloody or ugly or shameful. Will felt ashamed, he was sorry he'd done this, he understood now. The horrible price of being alive. All the blood and gore, one life taking another to survive. He could almost hear his father's voice. Will had to act fast. Meat spoils quickly without refrigeration. He mustn't waste this kill. As disgusted as he was he knew how shameful it would be to waste the meat. He pressed his face against the deer's hide and thanked it. He spoke out loud in a quivering voice, begging forgiveness.

He touched the two bullet holes, wiping the blood with his hand. Then he turned and set to work.

He stared by digging a large but shallow hole and surrounding it with large rocks to make a fire pit. He built a tripod out of thick sticks, covering it in branches and brush on two sides. He used some rope to string the deer up on a tree branch, and cut him open to bleed him out. Will was glad the deer wasn't any heavier; he was barely able to hoist the carcass up.

He remembered to start at the bottom of the sternum. Then he built a small fire in the pit. Once he got a small fire going he found some slightly green wood and began soaking it in water. He finished opening the deer and removed its organs, it was messy work and made Will feel queasy. He skinned it and added the wet wood to the fire. He cut thin slices of meat from the breast and shoulders, removing the tallow, rubbing them with salt, skewering them and putting them inside the tipi. After an hour of that Will had a very large amount of meat skewered and hanging to smoke. He covered the third side of the tipi, leaving a small hole to feed wood through. Then he cut a large piece of the deer's skin off and rubbed it with salt. He hoped to preserve it and tan it into cloth when he returned home. Will gathered more hardwood and soaked it, carefully maintaining the fire.

Once Will was satisfied with the fire he set to work cleaning up the area. He dug a hole and buried the organs and unused parts of the deer. After one last scan of the area he headed back to camp and gathered up all of his supplies. He moved his camp down to the pasture. By now it was lunch time, Will began a huge pot of lentils and rice, this time with large hunks of meat. It had been days since Will had tasted meat, he was excited at the thought of it. He sat all afternoon, eating and drinking, maintaining the fire. By sunset Will decided to brew another batch of psilocybin tea. He felt better, it was important to him. Plus he really didn't want to waste them. He sipped his tea, enjoying the last wild sunset of his journey. He used a larger handful of mushrooms this time, he wouldn't be taking them back with him anyhow.

Across the fire from him was the deer's head, bathed in the flickering firelight. Its cloudy eyes stared back at him across the shadowy darkness. Above him he could see Orion proudly battling Taurus. He thought about the story his father once told him about Orion once long ago. It was before his parents split up. They were camping in Tennessee. He pointed up at the stars and asked if Will could see the hunter and the bull. He told him he could always find him by his belt. Will stared at the belt and remembered the story. Orion, his father said, was the greatest hunter of all time. He could kill any beast, but because of his pride the gods sent a tiny scorpion to kill him. He was put up in the sky by Diana, who loved him dearly. Will thought about that time, him and his dad were on a fishing trip in Tennessee. They caught loads of fish and his father let him clean them and cook them. That was the last time his father ever took him camping. Now when he saw his dad his eyes were cloudy and far away, he never spoke much anymore.

Will looked across the fire at the deer's lifeless skull. He spoke to it. He told it about himself. He said that he loved the deer. He said that he was sorry.

The shadows swam in the grasses as the cold wind blew. Will sat close to the fire. Will didn't know what time it was; just that it was late, or maybe early by now. He wished for those shadows to return to their dance but none came. By and by he felt the tea wearing off, and he felt drained and tired.

He set to work stocking the fire up to last till morning. Satisfied, Will crawled into his bivy and fell asleep. The world

whispered to him as he slumbered and his dreams were uneasy and wild. In those dreams he saw the deer. The deer spoke to him with the voice of the man. He told him he was the one who watched him in the night. He was the one who gave him the feather. He told Will that he was a man. He told Will to go home and grow up strong. The deer man told him that he would live in his heart forever and that in this way he would never die.

***

Will woke up late that morning. He solemnly gathered up his gear, wrapping the deer meat in cloth and placing it in his pack. He cleaned up his campsite and started off toward the pickup point. The deer's head watched him as he walked away. In the distance, a group of buzzards watched. As soon as his figure vanished, and his steps faded away, they flew toward the site. He reached the spot by noon and sat down on the side of his road on his pack, sipping from his canteen.

After about an hour Will saw his father's little truck making its way down the highway. It approached and lumbered to a stop in the small trailhead's cut-away. Will stared down at his feet. He wanted to turn and run. He was really gonna catch it now. Will wished he was back in the shelter of the trees.

The engine burbled awkwardly to a stop. His father looked at him through the window of the small truck. For the first time in his life Will saw his father's eyes full of tears. Will got in the truck and stared down at the feather he'd tied to his pack. He twirled it in his fingers silently.

"Boy, I otta be mad at you. I took my one sick day to come up here and get you. Trouble is, I can't decide whether I'm angry, proud or just thankful you ain't dead."

"I was fine pop; you and momma didn't need to worry."

"Boy, if you ever run off like this again. I'll whoop your ass till your legs don't work. Do you have any idea how worked up your mother is?"

"Yessir," Will murmured.

"Did you see anything?"

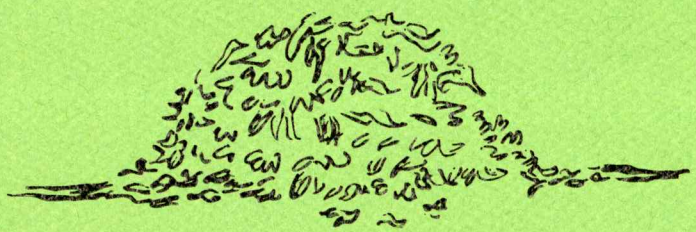
"Yessir," Will beamed. "I shot a five point buck yesterday! And I almost got a doe the second day out!"

Will reached in his pack and pulled out the drying skin. He pulled out the jerked deer meat.

"Have some" he said.

His father beamed with pride as he tasted the meat. He turned the key and the engine choked to a start. He slid it into drive and the pair lurched down the highway.

It was a quiet ride home for the two. The truck's heater stunk like burnt oil as they made their way home. As Will looked at the rolling countryside he thought about the shadows and the buck. He looked down at his feather and he heard their voices. Their voices made the chorus that sang in his soul. It was a long way home, but Will knew he didn't have to take it alone.

From the bottom of my heart, I would like to thank everyone who helped with the 2011 edition of the Tower. This year's Tower is a testament to the creativity and enthusiasm of UM students, who continue to make Montevallo a progressive campus and a wonderful place to be. It has been a pleasure carrying on the tradition of the Tower, and I hope it continues showcasing the creative endeavors of young Montevallo artists and writers for many generations to come.

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